

Chapter 4: George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

Sci Fi and Philosophy: Course Notes | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rctc.edu)



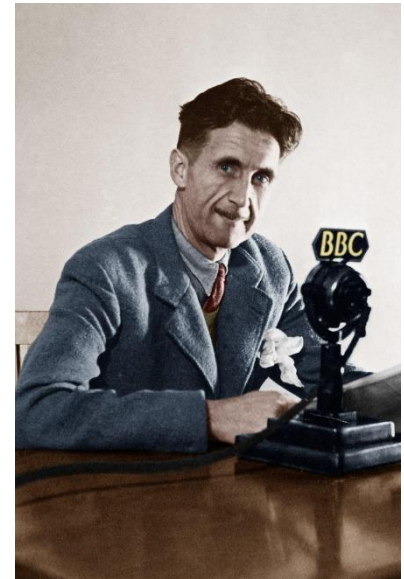
Figure 1 *Angry pigs.* (Brendan Shea × Dall-E)

In this chapter, we'll be starting our study of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (which we'll finish next chapter). This book is something like a modern "fable" and was written as a critique of totalitarianism in general and Stalin's Russia in particular. This introductory section is met to provide you with some background information about Orwell's life and times that will (hopefully!) help you get more out of the book.

1 GEORGE ORWELL: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

George Orwell was a British novelist, essayist, and critic best known for his novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's novels have been hugely influential, and they are among the most famous works of twentieth-century literature. Major events in Orwell's life include the following:

- 1893: Orwell is born in India to a British family. His father works for the British government.
- 1903-1911: Orwell is sent to England to be educated. He attends boarding schools in Sussex and Yorkshire, and briefly attends the prestigious Eton College.
- 1912: Orwell's father dies, and he is forced to leave Eton due to financial difficulties. He works as a private tutor and a journalist.
- 1914: Orwell joins the Indian Imperial Police and is posted to Burma (modern-day Myanmar). He resigns after five years, disgusted by the British treatment of the Burmese people.
- 1919: Orwell returns to England. He is critical of British imperialism and joins the Labour Party (the "left-wing" party in Britain).
- 1922-24. Orwell moves to Paris to work as a journalist. When he returns to England, he publishes his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, about his experiences of poverty in Europe.
- 1929: Orwell marries Eileen O'Shaughnessy. She dies in 1938.
- 1933: Orwell publishes his first novel, *Burmese Days*, about his experiences in Burma.
- 1936: Orwell goes to Spain to fight for the Republicans (against the Fascists supported by Nazi Germany) in the Spanish Civil War. He is wounded and returns to England.
- 1939: Orwell publishes his first book of non-fiction, *Homage to Catalonia*, about his experiences in the Spanish Civil War.
- 1941: Orwell publishes his essay "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius," which defends a version of democratic socialism.
- 1942: Orwell starts working for the Ministry of Information to aid the British war effort in World War 2. He also publishes his essay "Politics and the English Language," in which he criticizes the use of jargon and clichés in political writing.
- 1945: Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* is published. (Orwell had trouble publishing this book during the war, as Soviet Russia was allied with the UK and US in the war against the Axis Powers).
- 1946: Orwell's essay "Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of Gulliver's Travels" is published.
- 1949: Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is published. It is a dystopian vision of a future society controlled by a totalitarian government.
- 1950: Orwell dies of tuberculosis.



Nearly all of Orwell's works are available for free online (they are in the public domain in his native UK). They are also very readable, and I'd encourage you to check them out!

2 SOME IMPORTANT FIGURES AND EVENTS

While *Animal Farm* has some “big” themes—for example, about the nature of a just society and the meaning of “equality”—it also makes indirect references to several figures and events that Orwell assumed his readers would be familiar with. In particular, the events and characters in *Animal Farm* correspond to those in the Soviet Union. Here are some of the important people and events:

- **Karl Marx (1818 to 1883)** was a German economist and philosopher. His ideas about a **Communist** society, in which the “means of production” would be jointly owned by all members of society, were among the major influences for the Communist Revolution in Russia. Marx himself had little to say about what a “Communist” society would actually look like (he spent most of time writing about the contradictions inherent in 19th century capitalism). He expected Communist Revolutions would first occur in highly developed democratic, capitalist societies (such as Britain or the US), rather than Russia.
- **Imperial (or Czarist) Russia (1721-1917)** was, in comparison with its European neighbors, less developed both economically (largely rural, rather than industrial) and politically (with the Czars having few checks on their power). **Serfdom** was not abolished until 1861 (around the same time as the US Civil War, which ended slavery). Rural Russians remained very poor, however, and had few political rights. Political dissidents (especially if they disagreed with Russia’s aggressive stance militarily) were regularly persecuted. Russia’s decision to fully mobilize its troops in defense of its ally Serbia in July 1914 help spark the entry of other world powers (Germany, England, France) into **World War 1**
- **The February and October Revolutions (1917)**. The war goes very badly for Russia, and millions of people die from violence and starvation. This leads to the “February” revolution against the Czarist government, when a coalition of liberals (from the center-left and center-right), democratic socialists, and hardline **Bolshevik** communists overthrow the Czar and form a provisional government. Constant infighting between these factions (and a failure to end Russia’s involvement in the war) weaken the government, and the Bolsheviks take control in the second, “October” Revolution. (Something similar would happen in Russia of the 1990s before Putin took control). This eventually leads to the creation of the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)**, after the Bolshevik “Red Army” defeats the “White” Czarist army (which is half-heartedly aided by the “capitalist” powers).
- **USSR (1917 to 1945)**. The original leader of the Bolsheviks (and the USSR) is **Vladimir Lenin**. He is succeeded in 1922 by **Joseph Stalin**, a brutal leader who consolidates power over the next decade (eventually killing his main rival, **Leon Trotsky**) and is effectively a dictator by the mid-1930s. Stalin aids Orwell’s “Republican” side in Spain, but it becomes clear their main goal is extending Stalin’s own power (rather than creating/restoring democratic government). Stalin’s secret pact with Hitler (to allow the Nazis to invade Poland, as long as they give USSR half) are a key component in starting **World War 2**. Later, after Germany invades, the USSR becomes a part of the “Allies” along with the US and Britain.
- Liberals and socialists had mixed views of the USSR (and of Stalin) during this time period. Early on, there was quite a bit of excitement about the possibilities it represented (and disappointment over the choice of their governments to fund the conservative “White” army). Slowly, however, a number of important left-wing thinkers (including both Orwell and the philosopher **Bertrand Russell**) argued that Stalin was, in fact, really bad, and that the need to ally with him in World War 2 shouldn’t blind people to any of this.

3 THE STRUCTURE OF ANIMAL FARM (WARNING: SPOILERS AHEAD!)

Animal Farm has been widely read (and taught in schools) since its publication in 1945, and many, many summaries are available online. These are, obviously, no replacement for reading the actual book. That being said, it will help to have some of sort of summary available for you to look back on as you discuss the book. **I encourage you to read the book (or at least read a fair amount of it) before looking over this!**

Setting: Animal Farm is a set in an alternative version of mid-20th century Britain inhabited by (among things) talking farm animals.

Characters. Major characters in *Animal Farm* include the following:

- **Old Major**—A wise and respected boar who is the original leader of Animal Farm. He is the one who first articulates the philosophy of Animalism, and his vision of a utopia where all animals are equal inspires the other animals to rebel. He is usually thought to represent a combination of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin.
- **Napoleon**—A large, imposing Berkshire boar who is the leader of Animal Farm. He is ruthless, manipulative, and selfish, and will stop at nothing to maintain his power. He is widely understood to represent the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.
- **Snowball**—A small, white pig who is Napoleon's main rival for power. At least in comparison to Napoleon, he is intelligent and eloquent, and is passionate about creating a better world for all animals. He is widely understood to represent Stalin's rival Leon Trotsky (who Stalin had assassinated).
- **Squealer**—A crafty and cunning propagandist (and pig) who is loyal to Napoleon. He is adept at twisting the truth and convincing the other animals to follow Napoleon's lead, even when it is against their best interests.
- **Boxer**—A large, strong, and loyal workhorse who is one of the main pillars of Animal Farm. He is always willing to work hard, and his motto is "I will work harder." He represents the working class (or **proletariat**) of Russia, who risked their lives to help bring the Communists to power, with the hope of a better life.
- **Benjamin**—A cynical donkey who is one of the oldest animals on the farm. He is skeptical of the revolution and doesn't believe that things will ever really change for the better.
- **Mollie**—A vain and frivolous mare who is more interested in her appearance than in the revolution. She eventually abandons Animal Farm in search of a life of luxury.



Figure 2 Animals at a Rally

Plot. The major plot points are as follows¹:

1. The poorly run Manor Farm near Willingdon, England, is ripened for rebellion from its animal populace by neglect at the hands of the irresponsible and alcoholic farmer, Mr. Jones. One night, the exalted boar, Old Major, holds a conference, at which he calls for the overthrow of humans and teaches the animals a revolutionary song called "Beasts of England".
2. When Old Major dies, two young pigs, Snowball and Napoleon, assume command and stage a revolt, driving Mr. Jones off the farm and renaming the property "Animal Farm". They adopt the **Seven Commandments of Animalism**, the most important of which is, "All animals are equal". Snowball teaches the animals to read and write, while Napoleon educates young puppies on the principles of Animalism. Food is plentiful, and the farm runs smoothly.
3. The pigs elevate themselves to positions of leadership and set aside special food items, ostensibly for their personal health. Following an unsuccessful attempt by Mr. Jones and his associates to retake the farm (later dubbed the "Battle of the Cowshed"), Snowball announces his plans to modernise the farm by building a windmill. Napoleon disputes this idea, and matters come to a head, which culminate in Napoleon's dogs chasing Snowball away and Napoleon declaring himself supreme commander.
4. Napoleon enacts changes to the governance structure of the farm, replacing meetings with a committee of pigs who will run the farm. Through a young porker named Squealer, Napoleon claims credit for the windmill idea, claiming that Snowball was only trying to win animals to his side. When the animals find the windmill collapsed after a violent storm, Napoleon and Squealer persuade the animals that Snowball is trying to sabotage their project, and begin to purge the farm of animals accused by Napoleon of consorting with his old rival.
5. Mr. Frederick, a neighbouring farmer, attacks the farm, using blasting powder to blow up the (now restored) windmill. Although the animals win the battle, they do so at great cost, as many, including Boxer the workhorse, are wounded. Although he recovers from this, Boxer eventually collapses while working on the windmill/ He is taken away in a knacker's van (to be slaughtered for money).
6. The pigs eventually start to resemble humans, as they walk upright, carry whips, drink alcohol, and wear clothes. The Seven Commandments are abridged to just one phrase: **"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others"**. The maxim "Four legs good, two legs bad" is similarly changed to "Four legs good, two legs better".
7. Napoleon holds a dinner party for the pigs and local farmers, with whom he celebrates a new alliance. He abolishes the practice of the revolutionary traditions and restores the name "The Manor Farm". When the animals outside look at the pigs and men, they can no longer distinguish between the two.

4 SOME QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED

We'll be talking more about the philosophical themes and ideas in *Animal Farm* in the next lecture. However, here are some questions for you to think about as you start reading the book:

1. Orwell wrote about politics using a variety of formats: non-fiction essays, "realistic" fiction, science fiction, and fables. Why do you think he chose a "fable" format for *Animal Farm*?
2. Does the character of Napoleon "change" over the novel, or does he simply take advantage of new circumstances? What, if anything, can he teach us about the nature of "dictators"?
3. What do you think about the other "pigs" on the farm, specifically Old Major and Snowball? Are they meant to be "good" characters whose ideas are ruined by Napoleon? Or are they "part of the problem"?

¹ This is adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_Farm

4. Why do you think the animals in the farm “put up” with terrible government (by either humans or pigs)? What do you think Orwell is trying to say about the nature of humanity and political change?
 5. What do you think of the initial ideas of Animalism as proposed by Old Major? Do they contain the “seeds of their own destruction”? Or it is simply that Napoleon “twists” them?
 6. Which character, if any, do you think *you* most resemble in *Animal Farm*? Why?
 7. How would you describe the “conclusion” of the book? Is Orwell (who was himself a “democratic socialist!”) trying to convince that efforts to “change the system” are doomed to fail? Or is there some way that the animals (and the rest of us!) can do better?
 8. How does Napoleon use “propaganda” to control the animals on the farm? To what extent is being “educated” an effective defense against such propaganda?
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9. Many scholars have argued that recent era in politics (since 2015 or so) is perhaps the most dangerous one for worldwide democracy since the 1930s (with the rise of Stalin and Hitler). What do you think of this claim? What does *Animal Farm* have to teach us today?
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10. *Animal Farm* represents a failed attempt to create a better society. What would a *successful* attempt look like for the animals? For us?