

## SHAPING ORWELL'S REPUTATION

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Jeffrey Folks

*The Unexamined Orwell* by John  
Rodden (Austin, TX: University  
of Texas Press, 2011)

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**T***he Unexamined Orwell* is not a study of Orwell's published work but rather an investigation of various aspects of the "myth" of George Orwell, including the profound influence this myth has had on his followers over the past half century. John Rodden traces Orwell's influence on postwar and contemporary writers, from Lionel Trilling and Dwight Macdonald to Christopher Hitchens. He then discusses Orwell's influence in Eastern Europe and on global culture generally. For the serious student of Orwell, Rodden's well-researched book should hold considerable interest.

What Rodden has to say about the claims of various intellectuals to be the "American Orwell" is particularly interesting. Trilling, Macdonald, Hitchens, along with Irving Howe and John Lukacs, are all candidates for the honor, but all fall short of the mark, in most cases because they lack the fierce independence and moral courage of their prede-

cessor. Certainly, all the Orwellians discussed in this book wished to appear independent and courageous. Hitchens, for example, broke with liberals at *The Nation* over his support for the War on Terror, but this break occurred quite late in Hitchens's career and at a moment after 9/11 when military action enjoyed the support of most mainstream readers. Orwell's stand against tyranny was of an entirely different order, beginning with his eyewitness reporting on the conditions of the British working class and underclass and continuing with his perilous service in Spain in 1936–37 and his equally perilous (career-wise, at least) denunciation of communism following revelations of the Moscow trials during the same time frame.

Rodden's treatment of the Orwell legacy, although informed by an impressive amount of detail and careful investigation, fails to convey the overriding seriousness of purpose that characterized Orwell's works. The chapter on Trilling, for example, includes no substantive treatment of any of Trilling's works. It focuses instead on James Trilling's *American Scholar* piece arguing the case that the Trillings, both of them (father and son), suffered from attention deficit disorder. At this point, the chapter devolves into an airing of literary gossip and away from serious discussion, and it provides little insight into either Lionel Trilling or Orwell.

Then there is the chapter on Dwight Macdonald. The further one delves into Macdonald's gadfly career, the less he seems a candidate for the "American Orwell." Despite certain similarities of temperament—a definite eccentricity and a suspicion of group-

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think and statism—Macdonald’s politics led him in directions quite opposed to those of Orwell. Specifically, Macdonald’s embrace of the New Left, with its endorsement of violent revolution and forced collectivism, seems quite at odds with Orwell’s commitment to a traditional ethics grounded in British common law and accepted morality. Macdonald was not merely an anarchist but a radical antagonist to all that was settled and accepted. Orwell was just the opposite: an adamant defender of the “ordinary life,” of familiarity and custom, and of the redemptive force of a shared moral code.

In fact, there are a number of reasons for supposing that, “had he lived” (the question that always comes up in a discussion of his legacy), Orwell would have sided with conservatives rather than with liberals like Macdonald, Howe, and Trilling. Not only were these critics elitists; they were professional intellectuals, tenured and endowed in a sense that Orwell never was, and their dependency on liberal cultural institutions limited what they could express or even imagine. Howe, for example, liked to boast of his “clenched” style of writing, but one can hardly imagine him for long outside the sheltering halls of academe. When licensed intellectuals like Howe raise the clenched fist (literally or metaphorically), that radical gesture always comes across as rather silly. By contrast, Orwell, who sought out the harsh realities of life in a way that Howe and Trilling never did, showed no inclination to raise the clenched fist, except perhaps in early works like *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The mature Orwell understood the difference between language that is merely performative and that which truly carries weight.

Clearly, Rodden’s alignment with the liberal milieu limits his efforts in the same way that their flirtation with radicalism diminished the writing of Howe and Macdonald.

One of Rodden’s questions in an interview with Christopher Hitchens is quite revealing in this regard: Was it not “reasonable to suppose,” Rodden asks, that the Bush administration was never interested in Iraqi democracy but only in lucrative oil contracts for its supporters? (83). The question suggests a deep-seated suspicion of American power and influence, and in many ways Rodden’s reading of Orwell’s legacy is controlled by that mind-set. Rodden never seriously considers the possibility that Orwell, toward the end of his life at least, had become a conservative in all but name.

A large section of this book is composed of a collection of seemingly unrelated pieces. For example, there is a section detailing the author’s experience of lecturing on Orwell in the former German Democratic Republic. Herein, Rodden represents himself as a “disinterested Western historian” (153) of the Cold War attesting the sincerity of East German “ideals” even as he records interviews with those imprisoned and tortured by the regime. The conflicted approach is confusing, not only in this section but throughout the book. Later, for example, Rodden dismisses Western conceptions of the Iron Curtain even as he speaks of East German “captives” imprisoned within an Orwellian state. Which is it? The reader yearns for an answer, but Rodden never commits to a particular stance. Therein lies the crucial weakness of his approach, and one that makes this book seem more like a scrapbook of Orwelliana than a coherent analysis of Orwell’s legacy.

There is also a long section, only tangentially related to Orwell’s reputation, on math and social science education. There follows a chapter on the pedagogical difficulty of teaching “Politics and the English Language” in freshman English courses. Then there is a discussion of the possible encounter between Orwell and Hemingway in Paris early in

1945 and on the myth constructed after the fact of an event that may never have actually taken place. Rodden's account is interesting and thoroughly researched but only vaguely related to the question of Orwell's influence. (Hemingway was most certainly not influenced by Orwell's writing, though Rodden makes a case for its being the other way around.)

There is a brief section speculating on what Orwell might have written in a review of biographies of himself. There is speculation on "what might have been" if Orwell had married his childhood sweetheart, Jacintha Buddicom. There is an analysis of the narrative method of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and a chapter that reviews the circumstantial evidence for "The Big Rock Candy Mountains," an American folk ballad, as a source for the Sugarcandy Mountains and the ballad "Beasts of England" in *Animal Farm*. Finally, the author speculates on what Orwell's attitudes might have been, had he not passed away in 1950, on the Korean War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the two Iraqi wars. Not surprisingly, "Orwell's views" appear to coincide with those of the author as suggested in his interview with Christopher Hitchens and elsewhere.

The question of Rodden's alignment with Orwell, or lack of it, is crucial. Never does the author simply acknowledge what was in the end of paramount importance to Orwell's moral imagination: the fact that the ideology of Marxism was simply evil, as the true American Orwell insisted when he referred to the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." For Ronald Reagan (who is mentioned only twice in the text of this book and then dismissively), evil was real and present in the world. It remains so today, although for Rodden, it appears, the danger has never seemed as great as what others imagined. As he puts it in discussing the decline and fall of

Soviet communism, "'1984' never came to pass" (274). Or, put differently, "Orwell was a democratic socialist first and an anticommunist Cold Warrior second" (325). The judgment belies the fact that Orwell's greatest influence was precisely on those Cold Warriors and post-Cold War conservatives whom Rodden dismisses as extremists.

It is unfortunate that Rodden's arguments concerning Orwell's political orientation often rely on questionable comparisons or labeling. Orwell's politics, he insists, aligned him with leftists within the British Labour Party and with left-leaning intellectuals at the *Partisan Review*, but never with conservatives "such as [those at] the John Birch society" (325). Orwell would surely have caught the rhetorical trick that conflates a discerning conservative intellectual movement that included Leo Strauss, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz with the antics of the John Birch Society and that then contrasts JBS extremism with "virtuous" leftism.

Despite the evidence of Orwell's scathing attack on collectivism in *Animal Farm* and his single-minded focus on the evil of totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Rodden is attempting to align the Orwell legacy with a leftist tradition that embraced Marxism and that consistently supported détente with the Soviet Union. The logical conclusion of this argument is that Orwell was not really an anticommunist at all, or at least not one who would have supported military action in Korea, Vietnam, and Nicaragua. That view contradicts not just Orwell's published writings but the record of his personal commitments throughout his life.

As for Orwell's socialism, it might be summed up by the phrase "an honest day's work for an honest day's pay." That is not a quotation from Orwell or from some member of the British Labour Party but from Margaret Thatcher. (In her 20 September

1981 *News of the World* article, Thatcher went on to say “live within your means; put by a nest egg for a rainy day; pay your bills on time; support the police,” conservative maxims to which Orwell would also have ascribed.) It was the traditional ideal of the free Englishman exercising his liberties within a governmental system of limited powers that appealed to Orwell. The safety net of welfare services that Orwell reluctantly supported in the 1930s, if not at the end of his life was always depicted as a necessary evil. Unemployed workers should not be allowed to starve or freeze to death, but the dignity of work was always preferable to public assistance.

*The Unexamined Orwell* is a useful study of various aspects of Orwelliana that will be of interest to most students of Orwell's work. It is not, however, a work dedicated merely to tracing Orwell's influence: it is a book actively engaged in the creation of a particular conception of that influence. In the service of that task, the author marshals an impressive knowledge of the Orwell legacy, but one should not lose sight of all that is excluded from this investigation. It is not just that Rodden takes on one or several of the many aspects of Orwell's reputation as his subject: it is that in all he writes, there appears to be an attempt to steer the reader toward the author's reading of Orwell as a socialist and leftist first. This is not to say that the reader will not learn a good deal about the “unexamined” Orwell from this volume. Looking more closely, however, one learns a great deal as well about the way in which cultural historians such as Rodden help to shape the reputation of writers along ideological lines in ways that Orwell would certainly have understood, but of which he might not have approved.

## THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE BOURGEOIS CITIZEN

Ronald J. Granieri

*Not Me: Memoirs of a German Childhood*  
by Joachim Fest, trans. Martin  
Chalmers (London: Atlantic, 2012)

Joachim Fest, who died in 2006, was a kind of public intellectual much more common in Europe than in the United States. Beginning as a radio journalist in postwar Germany, he rose to one of the top positions in the German journalistic world as an editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. He also published a series of bestselling historical books and essays on the Nazi period. Most famous was his monumental 1973 biography of Hitler, which remains influential for relating the dictator's life to the larger intellectual currents in early-twentieth-century Europe, as well as a biography of Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, based on interviews the young Fest conducted with Speer in the 1960s. In his later years he also published a series of shorter works, including a historical study of Hitler's last days, which became the basis for the award-winning film *Downfall* (*Der Untergang*).

Never an active partisan, Fest nonetheless became known as a critic of the left-wing dominance of German intellectual life, most publicly during the so-called Historians' Quarrel (*Historikerstreit*) in the late 1980s over the uniqueness of the Holocaust. His arguments placed Fest to the right of center,

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