

“Political Economy of George Orwell:
A Critique,” by Don Mathews

Discussant: Cameron Weber
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HES 2019 Meetings

12:45 – 2:15 Sunday June 23

Session 10F (Ballroom 3): Public Intellectuals

Don Mathews on the political economy of George Orwell

Discussant: Cameron Weber

Relative to this session's theme of Public Intellectuals, author writes :

“Orwell [Eric Arthur Blair, 1903-1950] was a public intellectual, not a political economist. And from public intellectuals we look for keen insights and penetrating questions, not rigorously elaborated theories. In addition to being a wonderful writer, Orwell offered truly keen insights and penetrating questions.”

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Main finding:

‘The danger that socialism might – or, by nature, must - evolve into totalitarianism concerned Orwell over his entire writing career’.

“The central problem – how to prevent power from being abused – remains unsolved” (*Essays*, p. 150). Orwell left the matter of political power and its enormous potential for abuse unresolved. He also left the viability of democratic socialism unresolved.

Orwell didn't know’.

Don Mathews' study and critique on the political economy of George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair, 1903-1950)

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Another finding is that Orwell is inconsistent (or incomplete?) on capitalism's benefits for rising living standards for the “working class”, and therefore then as in recognizing an increasing middle class without addressing ‘capitalism’s’ benefits systemically related to that of ‘socialism’.

Don Mathew's critique on the political economy of George Orwell

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The paper (mostly from *Essays* rather than *Catalonia* and *Wigan Pier*) also refers to Orwell's use of the term 'proletariat'

It would be nice to know and maybe beyond scope of paper what was Orwell's relationship to Marxism, and maybe how does this relate if at all to *Homage to Catalonia* and Orwell's sympathies (if any and to what extent) to anarchism

Don Mathews on the political economy of George Orwell (1903-1950)

Orwell on American capitalism

‘Orwell discussed Walt Whitman’s reflections on democracy, equality and comradeship and concluded, “Lucky for [Whitman’s] beliefs, perhaps, he died too early to see the deterioration in American life that came with the rise of large-scale industry and the exploiting of immigrant labor”’ (1940).

In his *Essays* does Orwell mention the New Deal, and legal cartelization of industries under the National Industrial Recovery Act and the ‘high-wage’ doctrine?



Don Mathews on the political economy of George Orwell (1903-1950)

Paper mentions several times Orwell's discontent with the British class system ('hereditary privilege') and as perpetuated under education's policy.

It would be nice to know in more detail exactly what Orwell thought the class system is and how perpetuated and what reforms needed.

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Author finds Orwell incomplete in defining how democratic socialism would function yet two pages later gives Orwell's "six-point programme" for democratic socialism in England (1940).

Don Mathews on the political economy of George Orwell (1903-1950)

The first of the six points (1940) is:

“Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries.”

The 1945 Labour Party platform included nationalizations of coal, gas, electricity, inland transport, the Bank of England, telecommunications, civil aviation and iron and steel. All but iron and steel were nationalized before the 1950 elections.

Mary E. Murphy 1952. “Nationalization of British Industry,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science / Revue canadienne d'Economie et de Science politique* 18(2).

Where and when and under what context, if at all, does Orwell mention this development?

Don Mathews' study and critique on the political economy of George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair, 1903-1950)

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In the introduction author finds that writers trying to pigeon-hole Orwell as proto-public choice miss the mark, yet we find,

“In the minds of active revolutionaries, at any rate the ones who ‘got there,’ the longing for a just society has always been fatally mixed up with the intention to secure power for themselves” (1945, *Essays*, p. 926).

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Definitions, it would be nice to have further elucidation from the author as to what Orwell means by the terms “liberal”, “democracy”, and “state capitalism”. These terms are used thinly yet are important if we are trying to understand more fully what does Orwell mean.

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Relative to this session's theme on Public Intellectuals :

Orwell is a 'public intellectual offering keen insights and penetrating questions'

Economists offer 'rigorously elaborated theories' ("systems"?)

Are economists better at putting together the pieces of the puzzle than is George Orwell? How and/or why?

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Thank you, I look forward to seeing some more of this work.