SOCIALIST SACRILEGE: THE PROVOCATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND GEORGE ORWELL TO SOCIALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Matthew Fleagle
August, 2009
SOCIALIST SACRILEGE: THE PROVOCATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND GEORGE ORWELL TO SOCIALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Matthew Fleagle

Thesis

Approved:                    Accepted:

Advisor                      Dean of the College
Dr. Alan Ambrisco            Dr. Chand Midha

Faculty Reader                Dean of the Graduate School
Dr. Hillary Nunn              Dr. George R. Newkome

Faculty Reader                Date
Mr. Robert Pope

Department Chair
Dr. Michael Schuldiner
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.  THE TRICKLE-DOWN SOCIALISM OF SHAW</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE RADICAL AMONG REVOLUTIONARIES</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. MARXIST COLLECTIVISM AND THE LITERARY AESTHETIC</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
THE TRICKLE-DOWN SOCIALISM OF SHAW

“The Fabian Socialism of Mr. Shaw, accepted as a mere eccentric detail by the playgoing public of two worlds, is in reality not only the essence of the man, but the source and abiding inspiration of his entire literary output as well.”

*James Fuchs, 1926*

It is impossible to peruse the writings of either George Bernard Shaw or George Orwell without colliding head-on with the matter of socialism. What is more, the source of this pronounced political current in Shaw and Orwell’s literature is not coincidental or tangential, the inevitable product of coming to age in a culture rocked to its core by economic and political revolution. A complete analysis of Shaw and Orwell’s works will demonstrate that a definitively socialist outlook was vital to the aesthetic, structure and power of each writer’s respective prose. Consequently, critics should avoid any temptation to effectively sideline discussions of the significance and relevance of these writers’ contributions to the evolution of socialism, especially by characterizing this political facet of their writing as vital only for the historical contextualization of their literary works. Though Shaw and Orwell are each memorialized and criticized primarily as literary figures, something in which I think their aesthetic sensibilities would find great

---

satisfaction, their contributions to the critical assessment of European politics are notwithstanding neither common nor irrelevant. More significantly, their literary contributions and political contributions are, in many senses, one and the same. Any temptation to an unnecessary and unconstructive demarcation of political thought from literary expression and aesthetics will not serve the modern critic of Shaw or Orwell, for the two modes of thinking and writing, as Orwell and Jack London both asserted, are naturally inspired and challenged by each other.

Certainly, Bernard Shaw’s and George Orwell’s relevance as distinct and unique voices in the seeming cacophony of political debate that engulfed the first half of the 20th century has been clearly established, and not only in my present work. Shaw and Orwell were not simply exceptionally gifted writers tossing their hat in the ring as amateur political theorists wanting to banter with the big timers on matters relevant to socialism. Shaw’s dramatic characterizations of capitalists and plutocrats, aristocratic snobs and penurious rabble-rousers broached some difficult questions and supplied at times incendiary commentary on the nature of an increasingly socialist-leaning European culture. For Shaw seemed conscious of the disconcerting reality that Europe was still not fully aware of what it was embracing when many of its leading political parties began clamoring after Karl Marx’s blueprint for social revolution. Yet Shaw’s works were also, as many of his political enemies would be forced to acknowledge, exercises in literary and dramatic excellence. Orwell, likewise, has enthralled readers for ages with his witty project of scaling down the tenets of totalitarianism to an anthropomorphic fable about barnyard animals piecing together a just society on Mr. Jones’ farm. Soon after, Orwell fabricated a grittier and dystopic vision of Oceania that haunted generations with the
possibility that Big Brother, the icon of totalitarian government, would eventually divest mankind of every last vestige of privacy in the name of social stability and efficiency.

Shaw and Orwell both applied their visionary talents to honestly appraising a society torn between the outworn modes of capitalism prevailing after the industrial revolution and the comparatively unfamiliar, untamed specter of a socialist overhaul of Europe. To this end, they often indicted, with clear and express intention, some of the inherent blind spots and pitfalls of the socialism they instinctively embraced in the abstract sphere of political theory—including its propensity to err towards a problematically collectivist ethos. However, for this breach of an unwritten political code, Shaw and Orwell have repeatedly been castigated by leftist critics who resent what they perceive to be the clumsy and perhaps unnecessary undercutting of the revolution’s success, not only in Britain, but around the world as a direct result of their often skeptical and dissonant political writings. In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of Shaw’s socialist journey, and in the following chapter, I will assess Orwell’s place in the conflagration surrounding socialism in the 20th century. Lastly, I will explore the crucial and dynamic tension between the political collectivism of Marxist socialism and the individualist aesthetic of Shaw and Orwell’s writings.

When a body of George Bernard Shaw speeches were compiled and subsequently published as *The Socialism of Shaw* in 1926, editor James Fuchs rather ominously opined in his critical introduction to the work, “In an epoch of militant, class-conscious labor movements, any attempt of ‘the parlor’ to dictate and direct is a superannuated presumption” (5). The “parlor socialism” Fuchs disparages describes the Fabian society—primarily a culturally distinguished, well-educated band of socialist
intelligentsia, spearheaded rhetorically and symbolically for much of its history by George Bernard Shaw himself. This band of socialists faced opposition and ridicule from many critics in the wake of the apparent ascendancy of Communist regimes too violent and culturally vulgar, but in the predominant estimation of its observers, too irrefutably successful, to warrant any further consideration of “the puerility of Fabian aims and methods in politics” (Fuchs 8). Fuchs’s charitable, if condescending, characterization of what he perceives as an obsolescent Fabian Society takes as its primary assumption that the less radical approaches to social reform and the implication of socialist measures in European society, most brazenly and exhaustively outlined in the writings of Shaw, had passed its prime. Shaw, Fuchs suggests in complimentary fashion, was a master craftsman, “the inventor of … the spoken operetta of social criticism” (3). Nevertheless, Shaw’s vigorous, and at times vehement, apologetics for the Fabian brand of socialism should be, in Fuchs’s opinion, demoted to a rather eloquent and curious case study in effete political idealism (8).

Eighty years removed from the publication of this work, one wonders whether the relegation of Shaw’s socialist strategy and aims to the garbage bin of credible theory was not hasty, even presumptuous. The Soviet Union has now dissolved into a socialist state much more closely mirroring Shaw’s blueprint for socialism. The increasingly capitalistic leanings of China’s professed Marxist government are now bolstering economic position in the world, and a preponderance of European nations have for the last decade espoused (along with, arguably, an economically beleaguered U.S. citizenry, according to a February 7, 2009, *Newsweek* publication) a more modest and democratically orchestrated model of socialism. Accordingly, one questions whether
Fabian (or Shavian) literature might not stand being dusted off for a fresh, insightful and serious reading.

Over the course of this chapter, Shaw’s at times provocative amendments and abridgements to the core values and tactics of Marxist socialism, while the acting face and voice of the Fabian Society, will be not only explained in view of the unique historical context of his life, but also defended for their political prudence, intellectual coherence, and overarching theoretical consistency. A brief synthesis of Shaw’s at times sprawling but nevertheless cohesive commentary on aspects of socialistic theory relevant to this paper will be provided, focusing on the essays, “Socialism for Millionaires” and “The Impossibilities of Anarchism.” This analysis, coupled with perhaps the most illustrative and thoroughly provocative of Shaw’s socialist plays, *Major Barbara*, will comprise the literary crux of this essay. Over the course of this study, I will take several distinct dimensions of socialistic theory and practice into account: namely, the idealistic pitfalls of Marxism; the preferred catalysts and channels for effective, enduring social reform; and the individualistic versus collective agency of socialistic advancement. My ultimate aim for this chapter is to contend that George Bernard Shaw’s revisions to conventional Marxist thought lent the largely unmanageable political theory a coherent sophistication and pragmatism that it hitherto lacked. For Marxism has no doubt been warped at times by its own overstated mythos and placed at constant risk of theoretical hijackings at the hands of well-intentioned, but less informed propagandists. Moreover, Shaw’s thoughtful modifications to prevailing socialistic stratagems of his age, defended to the end of his distinguished career as both a British dramatic icon and political thinker,
have largely proved, over the wobbly track of recent geopolitical history, to be successful variations on the Marxist theme.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the historical development of George Bernard Shaw from a young and relatively obscure middle-class apprentice into the adamant socialist, political reformer, and iconic dissenter for which he is now fondly (and for some infamously) remembered. Tracy Davis, author of *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, tracks Shaw’s fixation on social stratification and class inequities to the dramatist’s principally conventional, yet occasionally eccentric, economic roots. He writes:

The Shaw’s were determined to assert status absurdly out of proportion with their means. The snobbery of the family—adamant that their surname carried aristocratic prestige—greatly affected what Shaw could and could not do in his early years, which schools he would attend, what he would do for a living, and how he attempted to present a prosperous face to the world. (4)

One might speculate that the haze of cultural incongruities that framed Shaw’s existence as a product of the British middle class may have indelibly impressed the absurdity and personal frustrations of a well-stratified capitalist class system on his imaginative young brain.

However, Davis censures the financial hypocrisies of Shaw’s twilight years, when the once vibrant and principled socialist began, in the judgment of some, to wallow in the excesses of his exceptionally comfortable income and social status: “By the end of the decade [1900s] Shaw had achieved genuine fame and wealth, and proceeded to enjoy both. Beatrice Webb [a fellow and considerably influential Fabian scholar] registered the changes with evident disapproval. In her view, his enjoyment of indulgence was
impeding the socialist cause” (94). Moreover, Davis points to a glaring inconsistency in
the radical tone of Shaw’s dramatic inventions and the conduct of his mature life,
following the establishment of Shaw’s reputation and monetary success as a master
British dramatist. “Pygmalion rails against the constrictions of a classed society,” Davis
contests, “yet since his marriage Shaw spent much of his time meandering between town
place and country place, and on the holidays and purposeless peregrinations his wife
adored. He lived the life of a leisured gentleman … and enjoyed all the privileges of high
caste” (94).

Nevertheless, Shaw’s early immersion in middle-class ideals no doubt impressed
upon him deeply the inherent moral blemishes and cultural hitches in the outworking of
European capitalism, and established the backdrop for his principled stances against
unequal distributions of incomes among the laboring and aristocratic classes. Moreover,
Shaw’s socially formative experience as an office worker in a land agency (the
proprietorship of which became the chief thrust of his case against capitalism in later
years) began to cement his aversion to the functions and protocols of capitalism. As
Davis reports, “His promotion to cashier brought him in closer connection with the
machinery of business and firsthand experience with capitalist accumulation at the
expense of the poor, though he could not rationalize his distaste for the system until he
became acquainted with the theories of Henry George nearly a decade later” (5).

Following Bernard Shaw’s introduction to Henry George and Karl Marx’s
economic theories, Shaw perhaps unknowingly seized on a unique advantage of the late
19th century intellectual climate to toss his hat in the political ring and take up the banner
of Marxist social reform in Britain. The advantage, as Davis adeptly observes, stems
from the following: “The nineteenth century is notable for entrenching principles of economic theory into common parlance. There was no economics profession per se, and so even the greatest theorists wrote for a general readership” (7). Thus, a young and though artistically preoccupied, nonetheless politically engaged, George Bernard Shaw began a foray into what rapidly and profoundly became his life’s passion—the rhetorical edge of the broader European movement for socialistic reform. The exceptional window of tolerance and, in a few cases, genuine reverence for literary minds eager to tackle economic quandaries might not have opened for a gifted young artist like Shaw in later decades.

Yet, in the late 1800s, Shaw seized on the opportunity to apply his formidable intellect to the prevailing social queries of political and economic reform movements in Britain and ignited the dual wicks of his intellectual curiosity and moral conviction. The phenomenon arguably enabled Shaw, over the next three or four decades, to assume a remarkably public (and, at times, almost obtrusive) role in prominent public debates over social reform, despite his lack of formal training or experience in economic matters and the conspicuously artistic bent of many of his literary contributions to the socialist cause.

In 1884, Shaw affixed his own passions and talents to a band of socialist intellectuals among whom he emerged in fairly short order as the predominant face and distinguished rhetorical voice. According to Tracy Davis, The Fabian Society, founded in 1883 (after the eponymous Fabius Cunctator, a Roman general reputedly notorious for his extremely calculated approach to selecting military strikes) held a piquant and enduring resonance for the young Shaw (17). Davis explains Shaw’s attraction to the
Fabians as a combination of social commonalities and a cohesive idealistic solidarity with fellow members:

[Shaw] attended his first Fabian meeting on 10 May 1884. The middle-class, tolerant, educated clique that sought to reform society by argument, brain power, and superior organization rather than working-class revolt was consonant with Shaw’s own philosophies. They would proceed at first with research and writing, develop their credentials, let a platform evolve, and then launch the full force of their influence to make an egalitarian state managed by people just like themselves. The next week Shaw delivered a speech the Fabians embraced as their manifesto. From that point he was an indispensible part of the society. (17)

Among socialists of his own intellectual and social ilk, Bernard Shaw began to hone his rhetorical style and exercise his prowess as an at times caustic and provocative but always thoughtful expositor of innovative solutions to social inequity.

A few more words about the distinctive objectives of the Fabian Society are in order before proceeding to outline Shaw’s contributions to the evolution of socialistic thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Fabians broke from the traditional Marxist mold of run-of-the-mill, revolutionary social reformation organizations. Concurrent with the activity of the Fabian society, another high-profile labor group called the Democratic Federation, more legitimately and effusively Marxist in rhetorical tenor and political aims than their Fabian socialist counterparts, was competing for the ears and hearts of the British electorate (Irvine 53). The Fabian Society took issue with the radicalism of the Marxist model and brand of persuasion, judging armed or political strong-arm resistance a broadly ineffective and unethical mode of social revolution. Their disagreement hinged not on the root economic problems of highly unjust and discriminatory means of distribution within capitalist societies, but rather upon the means of rectifying the lack of economic parity among European nations. The Fabians, in
contrast, advocated pervasive and comprehensive socialistic reform of the economic system using democratically achieved political leverage, rather than a forced usurpation or upending of parliamentary government on behalf of (or orchestrated by) the working class. In the abstract, the Fabians “envisaged a cautious and peaceful evolution toward socialism within the framework of the democratic state” (Irvine 54).

Shaw’s artistic, intellectual and social temperament accorded with the spirit and tone of the Fabian Society’s approach to social reform. Thus, he enfolded himself within the fabric of their vision and began to articulate by the imposing force of his adroit reasoning and artistic ingenuity what became the fundamental theoretical planks of their overriding philosophy. The Fabians, frequently under Shaw’s almost domineering direction, hammered out a series of counterpoints to the conventional Marxist prescription for effecting social reformation within society.

Nevertheless, at times even Shaw himself, with his uncompromising knack for throwing light on concepts customarily left untouched—including sacred cows of his day like the prevailing apathy and ignorance toward female prostitution, the pitfalls of religious enthusiasm and charity, and the pressing, but touchy matters of nationalism and war in the first half of the 20th century—often rendered Shaw the easy target of exasperated, mortified or humiliated Fabian critics. Not only did daring opponents to Shaw’s suggestions find themselves mowed down under the potent and inflexible drubbing of his rhetorical style or the truculent conviction of his ideals, but Shaw treaded on the toes of even close and supportive colleagues, some of them members of the Fabian society which he so loyally and vociferously served.
In keeping with this observation, it will not be an aim of this paper to excuse or rationalize every item of Shaw’s expansive and meticulously delineated outlook on matters economic, moral or political. In fact, Shaw’s less savory positions on matters of eugenics and violence will be stoutly criticized and rightly condemned later in this analysis. No doubt, virtually every modern critic (or fan) of Bernard Shaw has found it hard to stomach certain of Shaw’s more indecorous proposals, and could concur with Tracy Davis’s admission, “Like many of Shaw’s friends, acquaintances, and mortal enemies, I find myself simultaneously intrigued and exasperated by George Bernard Shaw. The qualities I admire in him are qualified with at least as many grave concerns” (xviii). Yet, with respect to the following matters—the idealistic core of socialism, the most effective channels and means for social reform, and a realistic assessment of the working class—Shaw’s musings, formulations and contributions stand to this day as not only highly defensible, but, it will be argued, brilliantly and efficaciously vital to the survival and success of socialism to the measure it has been implemented, particularly in Europe, to this very day.

Though Shaw consigned himself to the advocacy and defense of what he perceived as a more progressive and democratic take on Marxism, elevating and upgrading the tenets of Karl Marx’s revolutionary call-to-arms to a more palatable and feasible blueprint for social reform, it should not be understood that George Bernard Shaw ever promoted direct antagonism toward Karl Marx. A fair appraisal of Shaw’s writings on the finer points of socialism will bear this fact out. In fact, Shaw (and his critics) frequently acknowledge the dramatist’s transparent indebtedness to Karl Marx’s courage, conviction and economic philosophy. At a speech delivered to the
Parliamentary Party in London in honor of Shaw’s 70th birthday, the garrulous orator continued to tout profusely the merits of Marx’s genius, declaring to the assembly that “Karl Marx made a man out of me. Socialism made a man out of me” (“Speech” 154). Tracy Davis echoes Shaw’s sentiments when he argues, “For Shaw, reading Capital brought about nothing short of an epiphany. It gave him both a creed and a direction” (9). Davis likens Shaw’s sudden and absolute absorption into socialistic thought to a religious conversion that forever altered the course of his subsequent intellectual and artistic endeavors (9).

Moreover, the modern reader of late 19th century socialist literature may fail to recognize that in Shaw’s time, particularly in his early years as a Fabian socialist, the name “Marx” was still widely obscure—a buzzword in the mouths only of well-studied intellectuals or those thoroughly familiar with the catalyst of Parisian communist revolutions of the mid 1800s (Irvine 57). Only as the fascist, Nazi and Communist movements began effacing the historically steeped political traditions of Europe and denting the long-standing borders of Eastern European countries in the 20th century does it appear that the non-socialist world riveted its attention to the philosophical agent of such radical social metamorphoses and began seriously appraising Karl Marx as a thinker and writer. Furthermore, William Irvine speculates, “It was of course inevitable that Marx, with his emphasis on class war, violent revolution, and the purely partisan character of the state, should not have gained a great following in a nation traditionally devoted to legality and compromise” (57). Here, then, is where Shaw’s renovations to traditional Marxist revolution filled a crucial gap, particularly for the British populace. Shaw, in Irvine’s opinion, “attacks not the ideas but the temper of Marxism,” exposing
fault lines in Marx’s conception of the proper mode and mechanisms for effecting social revolution (56). As Irvine points out, “Marx’s system was terrifyingly huge and complex, but, as an engine for the destruction of capitalists theorists, it was, Shaw himself had discovered, a severe disappointment; it was always breaking down” (62).

Primarily, Bernard Shaw and the Fabians surmised that, while Marx’s compelling call for comprehensive social reform was valid, the dangers of an intellectually raw, morally vindictive working class, frenzied and in most cases fatuously propelled to revolution by a desire to violently even the score with a well-entrenched and insensitive aristocracy, was a prescription only for instant bedlam and enduring social mayhem. No effectively governed and organized socialist society, the Fabians contested, could feasibly be pieced together from the rubble of a chaotic revolution, like those that Marx seemingly advocated and endorsed in his eventual goal of dismantling European capitalism and plundering the bourgeoisie for the benefit of the proletariat. To this end, Shaw argued, a more democratic, pragmatic and realistic offensive toward capitalism would need to be outlined, schemed and implemented by the ablest, most passionate and philanthropic individuals within the current socialist movement (in one obvious case, by Shaw himself) to avert needless bloodshed, political turmoil and the tyranny of a largely uneducated, unsophisticated and untrained ruling body of former laborers.

Principal to Bernard Shaw’s formula for socialist reform was, first, the substitution of a crusader-like, emotionally fueled indignation toward the oppressive, wealth-monopolizing ruling classes of Europe with a steady and focused equanimity and a clear stratagem for social reform, devoid of any vague or trite idealism. In Shaw’s view, social reform began with the fundamental conviction and indispensible doctrine
that the handling, generation and distribution of money by a society is at the root of all true morality. “Money is the most important thing in the world,” Shaw proclaimed late in his life, “and all sound and successful personal and national morality should have this fact for its basis” (“Speech” 160). Shaw soundly dismissed and condemned what he perceived as the ineffectual, outmoded elements of past Communist revolutions, among them the ludicrous conviction “that the world would never be at peace until the last king was strangled in the entrails of the last priest” (“Speech” 150).

Shaw, on the other hand, conceded that the realistic, productive socialist would have to “put up with the state” in some manner or another—hopefully a stable one—at least until humankind evolved the capacity to render the state obsolete and manage its own affairs without organized government, something which, one could argue, Shaw appears to envision as a distant prospect and current impossibility in the progress of the species (“Anarchism” 139). In another apparent swipe at the overly idealistic and jingoistic elements of the Socialist left wing, Shaw bleakly pronounced that in his judgment, “Poets who plan Utopias and prove that nothing is necessary for their realization but that man should will them, perceive at last that the fact to be faced is that man does not effectively will them. And he never will till he become Superman” (“Speech” 160). Clearly, Shaw advocated a form of social revolution that prudently takes into account the necessity for instituting the political and social machinery to equalize class structures, building on the political foundations that already exist. For surely any successful political overhaul of government could not find its actualization in a bloody, mass revolt that completely eradicates the powers and institutions that be, thereby
opening society to the real possibility of a social free-for-all and, in the worst case, an anarchistic morass of unproductiveness.

On the other hand, Shaw’s prescription for social reform failed to account for another critical piece of the puzzle: providing a guarantee that a paternal government would not decline into bureaucratic complacency or, worse yet, into a stringent totalitarianism purported to heavy-handedly keep socialism on task, which might significantly hamper the institution of democracy under socialist rule. Shaw’s faith in Fabian socialism may, in the final analysis, have snagged on its pivotal supposition that disinterested patricians in possession of the reigns of government would necessarily administer the country justly for an indefinite period of time without appropriate checks and balances (of a democratic nature) in place. Most assuredly, Shaw’s strategic horizon for paternalistic, Fabian socialism always remained democratically oriented. However, as his socialist successors, most notably George Orwell, cautioned, even a charitable government invested with unconstrained authority and power to “reform” a society is inherently susceptible to a gradual usurpation or attrition of its original altruism by those inclined toward ruthless despotism. Orwell challenged the socialist status quo precisely on this point, illustrating the potential menace of totalitarian government latent to a statist mode for social reform (even within a scheme as altruistically and judiciously designed as Shaw’s). It is with this precise observation that the following chapter will deal.

Shaw lacked confidence in the integrity of ordinary citizens to sponsor or submit to a truly just government and system of economic distribution without some measure of financial security—hence, he viewed proper distribution of wealth as the backbone of social stability and evolutionary progress. With socialism, he comments, “We say that if
distribution goes wrong, everything else goes wrong—religion, morals, government …. 

We must begin with distribution” (“Anarchism” 152). Though Shaw acknowledged the ineluctable uphill climb of structuring a truly just and effectual body of government under socialist principles, he nevertheless offered his strategy as a counterpoint to what he believed proved a gaping lapse in Marxist theory on the matter of peacefully implementing socialist principles once revolution over the bourgeoisie has been accomplished. “When we have come into power,” Shaw forewarned his colleagues, “we have got to deliver the goods to the ordinary man and to remember he will never understand socialism any more than the present Government understands capitalism” (“Anarchism” 152). “We want above everything else a solid technique of government,” Shaw went on to say, “and we have to make our technique” (“Anarchism” 154).

Shaw’s innate suspicion of idealistically rather than pragmatically motivated social reform emerges elsewhere in his writings. Any notion that smacked of conventional or religious morality raised Shaw’s dander, and the mass of Europeans, in the playwright’s view, needed an emotional and philosophical jolt out of their stagnant, outmoded notions of moral responsibility. Socialism, to Shaw, was at its very center a moral initiative and movement rooted in the real morality of fair distribution of wealth and resources. All other moral considerations, as Shaw alludes in the above quote, would per force be set right in the wake of securing this one social achievement. Thus, Shaw never balked at chafing the hollow moral scruples of his opponents: “I am a specialist in immoral and heretical plays,” he wrote. “My reputation has been gained by my persistent struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals” (Davis xxi).
In the 1893 Fabian tract *The Impossibilities of Anarchism*, Shaw takes his stand against “principled” revolution (“principled” here construed in the conventional moral sense) a step further: “My own side of the controversy was the unprincipled one, as Socialism to me has always meant, not a principle, but certain definite economic measures which I wish to see taken” (“Anarchism” 109). Though, ironically, the Chinese communist intelligentsia have hedged their accolades for Shaw in view of what they perceive as his “idealistic and utopian leanings,” it appears quite clear that Shaw’s revolutionary impulses were typically subordinated to his penchant for rational and measured pragmatism in matters political (Chen 162). Shaw clearly and fairly consistently advocated a relatively gradual, practical and non-violent formula for social revolution. With reference to a socialist colleague’s encomium on the valor of martyrdom for one’s cause, for instance, Shaw derisively issued the following riposte: “The altruism of the incapable is far more dangerous than the egoism of the capable” (qtd. in Britain 388). In other words, well-intentioned people can unwittingly, by virtue of their enacting the stale and obsolete forms of charity and sacrifice, perpetuate and exacerbate poverty and injustice, while simultaneously ameliorating its short term symptoms.

In Shaw’s play *Major Barbara*, for instance, a iconoclastic, but highly successful arms manufacturer defends his violent trade and unconventional views on morality against the objections of his upper crust, well-mannered family. Ultimately, he converts his once charitable daughter (“charitable” here in the conventional, Christian sense) into a willing heir and accomplice in his efforts to reform society and eviscerate poverty by means of turning his enormous capital away from traditional charities and into more
productive and enterprising, if not radical, means of lifting the poor out of poverty. In this way, the highly complex protagonist, Andrew Undershaft, exercises his own unique prerogative to live according to his own standards and scruples, all based (not surprisingly) on the shrewd use of capital.

Act II of this frequently uncomfortable and at times incendiary drama illustrates and certainly epitomizes Shaw’s perturbation at the cheap indulgence and moral hypocrisy undergirding charitable organizations like the Salvation Army, for which Barbara, the enterprising and passionate young daughter of arms dealer Andrew Undershaft, works. Undershaft cleverly (or perhaps, dastardly) undercuts Barbara’s faith in the integrity and motives of the Christian charity organization for whom she crusades by demonstrating that Barbara’s superior is quite willing to forfeit her ethical principles of non-violence to take donations from a notorious arms manufacturer. Shaw’s authorial intent appears to show not that man has no moral responsibility but that he must eschew moral considerations that have no demonstrable effect toward eliminating poverty or elevating the working classes. To the extent that good intentions pave a path to perdition, Shaw condemns even the salvation army on these grounds and deftly but bluntly confronts the play’s audience with a compromising character who, despite his apparent selfishness and cynicism, has applied his intellect to developing a fully pragmatic and tangible means of truly alleviating British poverty.

In the final act of the play, Undershaft introduces his ideologically-deflated daughter to his arms manufacturing plant, where his well-compensated workers live peacefully and contentedly, free to practice religion and pursue enlightenment or happiness at their leisure. More analysis of the import of this striking scenic contrast will
follow, but to our present point, it should suffice to infer that though Undershaft may not in every respect be a character worthy of emulation, he has by token of his “immoral” lifestyle exposed the practical pitfalls of servitude to shallow ideals over the greater, and in Shaw’s view, morally superior expediency of economic reform.

In summation, then, the dramatist seems to have feared the impending dangers of allowing a poisonous and reckless idealism to outstrip socialists’ pragmatic efforts to effect real and lasting moral change in society. Idealists, in Shaw’s estimation, often lost sight of their own personal goals and self-actualization in pursuit of sham sentiments of vainglory, cultivated from religious or societal enforced ideals—like, for instance, Christian almsgiving (Britain 388). I. M. Britain references a few instances in the history of the Fabian Society when Shaw’s dogged insistence on scuttling conventional morality in favor of a pragmatic, monetary-based understanding of ethical imperatives and social justice drew the fire of fellow Fabians. As he reports, some seriously feared that Shaw’s extreme viewpoint might give rise to a moral anarchy within a socialist movement not anchored in more traditional and widely heralded moral values (394). Britain distills the conflagration over morality within the socialist ranks as follows:

On the one hand, there were those adherents who advocated, or could countenance, a complete overturn of the moral as well as of the sociopolitical order of contemporary capitalist civilisation. On the other, there were those who, while looking forward to a complete reordering of politics and society, still wished to preserve intact the received moral principles of their age—or at least the sense of an eternal and firmly-binding system of values and ideal of conduct. (399)

Perhaps some of Shaw’s compatriots had the unscrupulous but logically forceful arguments of his fictive iconoclast Andrew Undershaft in mind when they levied this criticism against the playwright. Even Shaw’s friend and admirer Beatrice Webb initially
characterized Shaw’s play *Major Barbara* as “ending … in an intellectual and moral morass …. It is hell tossed on the stage, with no hope of heaven” (qtd. in Davis 73).

Nevertheless, according to Webb, in a subsequent conversation recorded in her diary, Shaw insisted that she had missed the play’s point altogether, which was “the need for preliminary good physical environment before anything could be done to raise the intelligence and morality of the average sensual man” (qtd. in Davis 74).

All-in-all, Bernard Shaw sought to slough off the unproductive and hollow idealism which, in his well-considered opinion, afflicted and possessed even Karl Marx and spurred a preponderance of Marx’s followers to justify revolutionary violence and neglect truly efficacious (albeit slower and less radical) channels or means of reform. His vociferous objections to this stale brand of socialist idealism demonstrate Shaw’s clear thinking and moral acuity in a time when socialism was evolving from something incoherent and radical into something calculated, well-reasoned and largely non-violent. Even when his stance on conventional moral ideals hampered the praise or betrayed the confidence of his peers, Shaw insisted on the moral rectitude and intellectual cogency of his position. Britain characterizes Shaw’s stance as essentially a principled one, which called upon men to loosen their grip on outdated and obsolete forms of charity, in order to embrace more compelling and practical imperatives: “The objection to the idealist morality, in fact, was not that it demanded too much from human nature but that, in allowing for ‘evasion and sham compliances,’ it demanded too little” (397).

Thus, Shaw took a chisel to the idealist proclivities inherent in Marxist thought, and refined, or perhaps reined in, its underlying socialist principles, by subjecting each socialist tenet to the brutal test of pragmatic application and practical effect. Shaw hoped
to discard the prevailing brand of socialism for which “abstract labor flows like a metaphysical liquid and shines above them like a Platonic idea” and to supplant the abstract with policies and stratagems more concrete and viable in their application to European societies (Irvine 67).

Furthermore, Shaw’s thorough scrutiny of Marx’s thought exposed yet another highly contentious, but pragmatically-based error in previous socialist conceptions of class distinctions. According to William Irvine, Shaw felt that Marx’s theories elevated the laborer in a manner that generally manipulated the ignorance of the working class and misrepresented the real complexity behind economic equity—a struggle not epic or ideological (philosophical tinctures that appeal to the disgruntled and inspiration starved masses), but thoroughly and even mundanely practical (67). Herein, Shaw formulated what remains his most egregious offense in the eyes of mainline socialists of his day and the most heretical of his departures from Marxist theory—his scant sympathy for and scathing repudiation of the poor.

“Poverty is neither a wholesome tonic for lazy people,” Shaw once declared, “nor a virtue to be embraced as St. Francis embraced it. It is the worst of crimes and the most infectious of malignant diseases” (159). If Karl Marx might be envisioned as physically recoiling at any of Shaw’s suggestions, this most controversial of Shaw’s viewpoints would certainly provoke the greatest acrimony and serve as the most profound philosophical splinter between the two socialist thinkers. Nevertheless, Shaw’s palpable resentment of poverty remains the most eccentric, but crucial pillar buttressing his unique brand of socialist ideology.
Wendi Chen has documented the discomfiture of Maoists in the Chinese intelligentsia who abandon their sometime hero George Bernard Shaw on this precise point. “In socialist literature [according to modern Chinese literary theorists], characters are always clearly divided into heroes and villains; they are invariably praised or condemned according to their class background. Sympathy with [dramatic] characters like Sir George Crofts or Undershaft was unimaginable” (160-61). Marx would likely share this disapproving sentiment, in view of the fundamental place he reserved for the working poor in the original socialist revolutionary scheme. But Shaw would never countenance this embarrassing and reckless oversight of the social complexity that results in and perpetuates the disastrous cycle of modern poverty. Casually dismissing the coherency of Shaw’s depictions of the poor classes would be imprudent and unfair, given the depth of analysis he devotes to the subject in his essays as well as in the final two acts of _Major Barbara_.

The fair critic of Shaw’s body of speeches on the subject of poverty must dispense straightaway with the notion that he might have therefore resented a certain class of people. Shaw was not a snob, in the sense that he despised the poor. Rather, he lamented the scars of ineptitude and incorrigible banality, both moral and intellectual, that poverty left upon its unwitting victims. He was emphatically not a hater of certain individuals—whether poor or rich. But in Shaw’s scheme for comprehensive socialist reform, a certain ilk or type of individual would have to be eradicated—the uneducated, illiterate, bombastically ill-mannered chump (so perfectly exemplified by _Major Barbara_’s Bill Walker) that teemed in British city streets could not be tolerated if society were to advance toward justice and a more purely egalitarian system of government and culture.
However, Shaw quite doggedly insisted that to permanently destroy rather than coddle or ameliorate the immediate distresses of poverty and to successfully renew society, one must first reach a point of absolute and unflinching resentment—even a certain indignant sort of hatred—of poverty. Commensurate with this posture toward indigence, which likely earned Shaw his occasional reputation of being a crank, one must, in Shaw’s view, scrap the raw material of the working classes and wholly recondition them intellectually, emotionally and physically into individuals capable of contributing to and sharing in a wholesome, just society.

In his essays, Shaw supplies the modern reader ample rhetorical ammunition to shore up this viscerally objectionable view. A bulwark of his philosophy on poverty is his tacit, if not at times explicit, repudiation of Marx’s apparent assurance that the proletariat can provide the wherewithal to reconstitute an effective socialist government. Simply put, Shaw believes that feckless beggars cannot be counted on as props of a just society.

Tracy Davis records Beatrice Webb’s correspondence with Shaw regarding his seemingly ungracious attitude toward poverty in *Major Barbara*—where the solution to poverty emerges in the midst of an impudent armorer’s “perfect garden city at Perivale St. Andrews” (qtd. in Davis 74). Shaw reportedly offered the following rational vindication for his ostensibly outlandish condemnation of poverty:

> We middle-class people, having always had physical comfort and good order, do not realize the *disaster to character* in being without. We have, therefore, cast a halo around poverty instead of treating it as the worst of crimes, the one unforgivable crime that must be wiped off before any virtue can grow …. What we want is for the people to turn round and burn, not the West End, but their own slums. The Salvation Army in its fervour and its love might lead them to do this and then we really should
be at the beginning of the end of the crime of poverty. (qtd. in Davis 74-75)

In true Shavian fashion, Shaw’s direct and impeccable logic here redeems the often pugnacious stylistic delivery of the philosophical kernel he is peddling to his audience. *Major Barbara*’s protagonist Andrew Undershaft, while a manifestly unscrupulous, opportunistic and egocentric character, nevertheless conveys Shaw’s fundamental conviction about the poisonous misapprehension of poverty that ultimately stymies both Christian and Marxist efforts to eradicate it. Too many advocates of social reform, as Shaw illustrates, designed their blueprints for revolution and reform around the faulty and intellectually unfounded assumption that poverty breeds men and women of hardy, unselfish character. If that were true, why elevate a man from the mire of poverty at all? Shaw grasped this subtle but precarious contradiction in Marxist theory, and in spite of the consternation of several close colleagues in the Fabian ranks, chose to expose this defect in both dramatic and, as we will see, in rhetorical forms.

As a more didactic parallel to *Major Barbara*’s at times abrasive and obscure manifestation of Shaw’s views on poverty, he provides a more explicit and transparent explication of his views in the 1901 Fabian pamphlet *Socialism for Millionaires*, roughly four years before *Major Barbara* premiered on the British stage. In a passage subtitled “Why Almsgiving is a Waste of Money,” Shaw argues that direct donations to the poor or charities organized for the alleviation of the physical distresses incurred by poverty in effect enables “people who have discovered that it is possible to live by simply impudently asking for what they want until they get it, which is the essence of beggary” (“Socialism” 93). “Woe to the man who takes from another what he can provide for
himself; and woe also to the giver!” Shaw emphatically protests in the essay (“Socialism” 93).

Neither do charitable donations to hospitals or schools escape Shaw’s stern and adamant disapprobation, since in Shaw’s view such charitable offerings serve ultimately to prop up the systemic cycle of poverty in modern societies. Shaw explains that the outworn modes of healthcare and education sanctioned in Britain continue to reinforce and perpetuate a system that allows the most penurious segments of culture to remain comfortable in their indigent condition. Poverty, in Shaw’s assessment, naturally debases and numbs the human personality, shackling a citizen’s potential to constructively and productively engage in society as a competent and contributing member. Consequently, Shaw adopts a sneering and snide posture toward the British education system, which offers nothing more than “caste initiation” in Shaw’s unforgiving judgment. He rues the average British citizen’s matriculation through a woefully inadequate and defunct British education system which renders its pupil a “disastrously bungling amateur in his all-important political capacity as voter by grace of modern democracy” (“Socialism” 98).

Purportedly, Shaw’s effort to deter charitable giving to schools, religious organizations and hospitals represents not an effort to rob the poor but to financially starve the social institutions that in his unequivocal view shore up the class system that short-circuits just distribution of wealth and opportunity in British society.

Shaw’s ultimate solution to the problem of inefficacious charities and charitable institutions is to redirect one’s charitable, compassionate impulses toward channels that ensure pragmatic and enduring reform. Directed in this case toward British millionaires, Shaw’s admonition is not for the proprietors of great wealth to forbear from charitable
giving under any and every circumstance, but simply “to subsidize any vigilance society that is ably conducted and that recognizes the fact that it is not going to reform the world, but only, at best, to persuade the world to take its ideas into consideration in reforming itself” (“Socialism” 99-100). Here one can see the rhetorical mold for Shaw’s arms manufacturer extraordinaire Andrew Undershaft taking shape, a provocative personage who would embody and argue Shaw’s notions as a dramatic counterpart to his unapologetic and at times brusquely argued pamphlet incarnated in the play *Major Barbara*. Elsewhere, Shaw sums his advisement to the wealthy as follows: “A safe rule for the millionaire is never to do anything for the public, any more than for an individual, that the public will do (because it must) for itself without his intervention” (“Socialism” 97).

Delving further into the ideological bases for Shaw’s scathing assault on poverty, one must survey Shaw’s intrepid defense of a hierarchical (rather than a purely egalitarian) socialist government outlined in the 1893 Fabian tract *The Impossibilities of Anarchism*. Here, Shaw begins by positing the reasonable notion that, taking all humanity into account, greed is not a perfidious proclivity exclusive to the wealthy classes but the rudest and the most prevalent of human shortcomings. “Public opinion has been educated to regard the performance of daily manual labor as the lot of the despised classes. The common aspiration is to acquire property and leave off working,” Shaw contends. “These prejudices are not confined to the middle and upper classes: they are rampant also among the workers” (“Anarchism” 124-25). Shaw makes the case that a poor, uneducated laborer has no inherent moral advantage over the wealthy, particularly when waging war against personal avarice or complacency, should he suddenly inherit a
substantial financial windfall. Rather, the poor citizen suffers from the same propensity
to indolence and indulgence that suffuses the lifestyles of the aristocracy in Britain and
will even lord over his neighbor the slightest elevation of station that he can procure in
comparison to his neighbor. Shaw puts his argument in very specific and pragmatic
terms:

The moment you rise into the higher atmosphere of a pound a week, you
find that envy, ostentation, tedious and insincere ceremony, love of petty
titles, precedences and dignities, and all the detestable fruits of inequality
of condition, flourish as rankly among those who lose as among those who
gain by it. In fact, the notion that poverty favors virtue was clearly
invented to persuade the poor that what they lost in this world they would
gain in the next. (“Anarchism” 125)

In fact, Shaw postulates in a moment of piquant candor, “One is almost tempted in this
country to declare that the poorer the man the greater the snob” (“Anarchism” 125).

Consequently, the tract concludes, the enforcing of social justice must fall to a
democratically elected and efficient but nonetheless commanding agency (in Shaw’s
obvious view, the well-tuned socialist government he conceived and sought to institute)
unto which men are held accountable to ensure the productivity and fiscal restraint that a
successful egalitarian system requires of its members.

Thus, at the heart of Shaw’s at times blistering rhetoric and denunciation of
poverty was a two-fold conviction. First, Shaw believed that “Democracy cannot rise
above the level of the human material of which its voters are made” (“Anarchism” 161).

Consequently, poverty must be eliminated like a gangrenous social amputation that
allows the remainder of society—including the poor who are salvaged from these drastic
measures to elevate, and not simply to placate the lower classes—to thrive as gentlemen
and not as the dregs of society, suffocating at the floor of the cultural pool. Throughout
his Fabian years, George Bernard Shaw remained highly incredulous toward Marx’s idealistic insistence that the working classes, fueled by a common, unifying vision and galvanized by their just indignation of unequal distribution of wealth, could mount a successful revolution against the bourgeoisie plutocracy and institute an efficacious, reformed system of government in its place. To the contrary, Shaw boldly, forcefully and stubbornly contended even to the dusk of his life that, in view of the evidence available to late 19th and early 20th century socialists, “the masses are not intelligent enough to recognize and secure their own interest” (Irvine 71).

Secondly, the denizens of a socialist society who insist on clinging to the familiar values and habits seared into them by decades of consignment to an impoverished experience must be elevated to the status of gentlemen and gentlewomen in order for any socialist program to succeed. For as Shaw pointed out in the National Liberal Club Debate of 1913:

> The more important fact you have to face is that the Labor men are not gentlemen; that is to say, that they have been trained up for generations in the idea and habit of each man selling himself for as much as he can get. The consequence is they are thoroughly against this idea of equal distribution [of incomes]. Every man of them thinks that he should have more than somebody else. (“Case for Equality” 76)

Shaw later enumerated the specific qualifications of the individual who can effectively serve as a spoke in the wheel that will propel Socialism, characterizing his exemplar as a picture of a true “gentleman”:

> Also the real gentleman says—and here is where the real gentleman parts company with the sham gentleman, of whom we have so many: “In return for that I am willing to give my country the best service of which I am capable; absolutely the best. My ideal shall be also that, no matter how much I have demanded from my country, or how much my country has given me, I hope and I shall strive to give to my country in return more
than it has given to me; so that when I die my country shall be the richer for my life. When you have a man of that type, you never find that he asks for more than any other man. (“Case for Equality” 83)

In way of conclusion to the arguments reprinted above, Shaw remarked, “The real constructive scheme you want is the practical inculcation into everybody that what the country needs, and should seek through its social education, its social sense and religious feeling, is to create gentlemen; and, when you create them, all other things shall be added unto you” (“Case for Equality” 83).

In his insistence upon a realistic and frank assessment rather than an overly optimistic and embellishing panegyric of the poor, laboring classes, Shaw “parts company” with his role model, Karl Marx. Shaw’s tendency to pin his hopes for social reform on characters like Andrew Undershaft, a man well-endowed with the financial and intellectual resources to effect the kind of change the playwright optimistically envisaged for modern society, has in some cases fomented confusion not only for Shaw’s contemporary colleagues in the socialist movement, but also for modern critics of his oeuvre. In his essay, “Shaw Reinterpreted,” for instance, Nicholas Williams speculates on what he sees as ambiguous conflations of socialist ideals with capitalistic remedies emerging in the last act of Major Barbara. Williams argues that the alleged contentment of Undershaft’s workforce represents an ironical exemplum of “Marx’s theory of alienation … inferred from the complacency of the well cared-for workers at the Undershaft arms plant,” as though Shaw intended his audience to digest Major Barbara as a cautionary tale of overreaching capitalist agencies stripping humanity of its individuality and will to revolt against bourgeoisie oppression (147). But in view of Shaw’s own comments to Beatrice Webb on the instructional and thematic aims of the
play, a much sounder reading of the drama could hinge on the inference that Undershaft’s almost paradisiacal abode is first and foremost a foil to the squalid, chaotic conditions of the Salvation Army shelter in Act II. Secondly, but just as significantly, Andrew Undershaft, though at times caustically distant and disconcertingly cool in his demeanor, has achieved what Shaw articulates as the chief aim of any competent and well-designed socialist revolution—to satisfy people’s essential needs for physical shelter and sustenance, a productive role in society, and the means to live as proud, industrious “gentlemen.” As such, they palpably embrace their freedom and cultivate the appetite to ardently and hungrily seek personal edification in order to elevate not only themselves but also the society they inhabit.

Consonant with and perhaps derivative of his conviction that poverty had been whitewashed and repackaged as the origin of morality and the perfect catalyst for political revolution (when in Shaw’s view it was in fact the root of perpetual social chaos and the most corrosive agent to the advancement of the human race), Shaw likewise insinuated that socialism would find its best implementation through existing political channels. Here, once again, Shaw’s socialistic theory butts heads with Marxist aspirations of a unified workers’ revolution. Yet, the dramatist was soundly convinced that “there is no future for men, however brimming with crude vitality, who are neither intelligent or politically educated enough to be socialists” (“Anarchism” 162).

The Fabians, rallied and stoked by the august discourses of their premier voice in George Bernard Shaw, propagated a new and less transparently revolutionary approach to national economic reform and drew perhaps more backlash from fellow socialist organizations for this point than any of the other significant planks comprising their
unique species of socialism. Crystallizing the key essence of the Fabian permutation of traditional Marxist theory, Davis writes:

Most significantly, they argued themselves away from some of the mainstays of Marx. They agreed with his historical account about how capitalism evolved but disagreed about what should happen in the future. They advocated common ownership of the means of production, but did not see this coming about through the overthrow of the parliamentary system: democracy should be extended gradually, not abandoned suddenly. (18)

Shaw and his ilk staunchly recommended to their socialistic compatriots that a gradual changing of the guard in strategic political posts would serve the ends of socialism more effectively and with less collateral damage to the members of their movement. Their strategy represented a considerable departure from both the zealous, bellicose spirit and the radical tactics of French socialist revolutions executed in the 19th century, prior to the founding of the Fabian society. Davis points out that, perhaps more conveniently and certainly more expeditiously:

Fabian conceptions of mass reform did not require a working-class revolution, or even the working classes’ cooperation, for they did not see social change coming about through mass movements. They were not troubled by a membership exclusively of the middle-class bourgeoisie because they foresaw a state run by bureaucrats whose talents and education (rather than their birthright or political influence) led them to political and service offices. (65)

Hence, the quiet tidal wave of socialistic reform would, in the Fabian view as in Bernard Shaw’s, incrementally swell as intellectual and personally charismatic standouts cropped from the socialist movement infiltrated British parliament and began to renovate political policy one step at a time.

Shaw even integrated this less violent scheme and radical tone for social reform—built primarily around the agency and support of the socially conscious segments of the
British middle class, whom the Fabians figured as the proper catalyst for social restructuring—into the fabric of his plays. As Davis explains, “Shaw addressed the habitual theatergoing middle classes with realist aesthetics and philosophical conundrums, while the worker’s theatre took drama to the factory gates and union halls with stark ‘poor’ resources and unambiguous political propagandizing” (85). Shaw did not set his rhetorical sights on the poor masses—who would likely have responded only to calls for revolution in the form of bombastic socialistic grandstanding on the public squares. Rather, Shaw tailored the Fabian message for colleagues, peers and compatriots among the bourgeoisie, who, he felt, were capable of wrestling with nuanced Fabian interpretations of Socialism encoded into the richly symbolic medium of stage drama. Here, the unconventional and sophisticated points of socialism could be related to a theatre audience, at least partly equipped to catch the drift of Shaw’s revamping of the Marxist model for social revolution.

Yet, as pointed out earlier, even some of his intellectual peers at times became disoriented while trying to decipher Shaw’s aesthetic renderings of socialist theory. This is significant, for while Shaw harbored a profound desire to elevate the common man, it could be argued that he consistently failed to channel the vox populi necessary to catapult his views into the popular consciousness. Later, George Orwell, perhaps as formidably intellectual and nearly as rhetorically gifted as Shaw, developed and deployed several aesthetic media that much more effectively resonated with public sentiment than Shaw’s brilliant, but often pedantic plays—the forms of fable and science fiction.

Though today few in Western academia would question the ultimate ideological and historical triumph of Shaw’s more temperate approach to social reform over and
against the dramatic and at times barbarous measures of communists to secure power for the proletariat, the relentless barrage of criticism from more radical elements of the socialist movement in Shaw’s day at times hindered the more moderate Fabian objectives. Even Shaw wavered in his conviction on these distinctive points of the Fabian socialist philosophy, particularly in the latter phases of his career.

For one, Shaw and his ideological kin endured the jeers of those who believed the Fabians were not resilient or plucky enough to stand the necessary concession of violence for the ultimate acquisition of socialistic goals. And certainly, the Fabians preferred “a movement built on persuasion, rather than revolution” (Davis 65). Bernard Shaw harbored considerable skepticism as to the actual promise of securing social reformation by means of a fundamentally Marxist revolution, charging, as Davis paraphrases him, that “the Marxist vision of the future is not the beginning of a new and better order but the collapse of all order” (13). Moreover, George Watson, in his critique of historical Socialism, has echoed Shaw’s sentiments, calling “communism” Socialism’s “more violent rival” (62).

Initially, Shaw’s reservations about employing violent tactics peppered his commentaries on contemporary socialistic movements. In the tumultuous buildup to World War II, an observant Shaw condemned the violent turn of Adolf Hitler, an avowed (and for some time a seemingly effective) socialist head of state, by remarking, “Mr. Hitler did wonders for his country by his National Socialism, and then threw it all away to turn his workers into soldiers and his factories into munition works when they might have been making themselves happy and comfortable as sensible welfare workers” (qtd. in Davis 138). Coming from the inventive mind that gave the theatre a nefariously
antipatriotic, opportunistic arms manufacturing protagonist in Andrew Undershaft, Shaw’s unfavorable stance on Hitler’s militaristic penchant might come as a surprise. However, in view of arguments and comments previously outlined, Undershaft cannot be fairly read as a philosophical mouthpiece for his dramatic creator, nor Shaw’s play as some sort of jingoistic manifesto, for *Major Barbara* is first and foremost a play about systemic forces that perpetuate poverty and the necessity of the individual to wield wealth in a way that eviscerates the sources of poverty and human banality at their roots. Shaw’s excoriating view of Hitler’s militarism (not to mention his blandishment of the most vulgar strain of inherent German nationalism) and vehement opposition to Hitler’s vindictive racist policies should nullify any suggestion that Shaw identified with Hitler’s imperialistic aims to leverage unbridled military force to imperialistic and nationalistic ends (Davis 138).

Nevertheless, Shaw’s distaste for violent revolution sometimes gave way to his mounting impatience to see socialistic objectives achieved in Europe, occasionally impelling endorsements from his pen of tyrannical authoritarians like Benito Mussolini in 1922 (Davis 133). Later, Shaw issued a veiled endorsement of Vladimir Lenin’s stringent abridgement of free speech on the part of Russian academics and even the despot’s execution of ideological enemies—assertions utterly out of character for Shaw, the powerful free speech advocate and rhetorical centerpiece of the moderate wing of British Socialism (Davis 134). Most likely, Davis argues, Shaw’s about-face on a foundational principle of Fabian socialistic reform can best be explained as the outcrop of his nagging dissatisfaction with the rate of progress in his socialist aims.
On the whole, however, Shaw’s Fabian legacy as an advocate of well-organized and less violently radical initiatives to effect socialist revolution overshadows his sporadic forays into the authoritarian camps of Lenin, Stalin or Mussolini. Shaw appears to have admired and envied their successes (albeit temporary) in the advancement of Marxist aims more than their selected modes of transmitting socialistic reforms to the citizenries of their respective countries. For a cursory examination of Shaw’s political discourses cannot help but reveal his deeply ingrained moral passion and wholehearted intellectual predilection for a democratically engineered and enforced brand of Socialism.

In the tract *The Impossibilities of Anarchism*, Shaw forcefully defends the need to institute a powerful central government to not only manage but also enforce its citizens’ compliance with the operation of an effective Socialist state. Nevertheless, he punctuates his dialectic with continual assertions that the organization and interworking of the powerful, efficient central government he envisions must be suffused by democratic values and coordinated toward democratic ends. Shaw, like so many promoters of democratic values, insists that humankind is wired with an insatiable yearning for freedom and individualism, regardless of the collectivist prejudices often assumed or extrapolated from socialist writings and philosophy. When referencing the highly illustrative anecdote of a Russian laborer who fled to England, willing to work an additional five hours a day under the grueling British system of capitalism rather than endure one more thirteen-hour day under the directly oppressive thumb of his Russian overseer, Shaw states, “Reason is dumb when confronted with” a purely visceral human reaction to oppression like the one previously depicted (“Anarchism” 129). He goes on to elucidate what he has come to understand as a fundamental quality of human nature:
Man will submit to fate, circumstance, society, anything that comes impersonally over him; but against the personal oppressor, whether parent, schoolmaster, overseer, official chief, or king, he eternally rebels …. No modern nation, if deprived of personal liberty or national autonomy, would stop to think of its economic position. Establish a form of Socialism which shall deprive the people of their sense of personal liberty; and, though it double their rations and halve their working hours, they will begin to conspire against it before it is a year old. We only disapprove of monopolists: we hate masters. (“Anarchism” 129)

On this watershed in the current of Socialistic thought, George Bernard Shaw, like his socialistic successor George Orwell, takes a decidedly democratic, individualistic, and conservative stance. Shaw ends this line of reasoning by framing the central conundrum of introducing a truly vital and enduring Socialism to a race of innately selfish, anarchistic people as follows: “Then, since we are too dishonest for Communism without taxation or compulsory labor, and too insubordinate to tolerate task work under personal compulsion, how can we order the transition so as to introduce just distribution without Communism, and maintain the incentive to labor without mastership?” “The answer,” Shaw instantly avers, “is, Democracy” (“Anarchism” 129).

By virtue of this bold assertion, Shaw indirectly preempts and diffuses the claim advanced by George Watson (among other conservative-leaning critics) that “Socialism was from its origins a hierarchical doctrine [which] habitually venerated aristocracy and leadership,” and that socialists (including, one can assume, George Bernard Shaw) “were not snobs in spite of being socialists, in all likelihood, but socialists because they were snobs” (48). Undoubtedly, Shaw expressed the common concern of the political left that a potent and thoroughly involved central government was necessary to execute fair and comprehensive socialistic reform. However, though Watson is right in suggesting that Shaw, like H.G. Wells, derided the notion that ordinary people can be trusted with
political choice, he misreads the playwright’s patent conviction that “only privilege educates for the due exercise of centralised [sic] power in a planned economy” (49). This tenet of Fabian socialism cannot be distilled to patent evidence of Shaw’s inherent snobbery, since it is clear that a sentiment quite contrary to superciliousness is at operation in Shaw’s socialistic philosophy.

The underpinning of Shaw’s socialist thought is not prideful, hollow pedantry on political matters, but a vivid, empathetic urgency to elevate humanity by permanently precluding the pervasive cultural and economic conditions that spawn the prevailing ignorance of the laboring classes and imprison them in a dehumanizing cycle of squalor. Shaw’s formula for effective socialistic revolution was democratic at its core, morally principled but pragmatically engineered, and perhaps most significantly, vitally fueled by the conviction and theoretical premise that people deserve justice but also crave personal freedom.

George Bernard Shaw, while an unflinching orator, social provocateur, and at times a heavy-handed rhetorician, did not fail to recognize—nor does he appear insensitive to—the prickly critical reactions his opinions generated in the consciousness and moral sensibilities of not only British capitalists but also the hard-line Marxists whom he considered, at least in outlook, to be his comrades in the Socialist struggle. Shaw was deeply cognizant of and compelled by the brutal injustices imposed on the European laborer, and never meant to denigrate the members of the working class, only to sift the idealistic frills and embellishments from the Marxist picture of class-based, class-driven revolution. In The Impossibilities of Anarchism, Shaw admits, “All this may sound harsh, especially to those who know how wholesomely real is the workman’s
knowledge of life compared to that of the gentleman, and how much more genuinely sympathetic he is in consequence” (126).

The difference between Karl Marx and Bernard Shaw’s conceptions of social reform is one of practical application, vision and technical mode, not one of spirit, desire or the delineation of their common foe—an egregious capitalist sham perpetuated by the plutocracies of European nations. As Shaw fulsomely commented of his hero and philosophical predecessor, “Marx, I say it again, changed the mind of the world … everybody was made ashamed of capitalism …. Marx made a man of me” (“Speech” 154). Nevertheless, Shaw never backed off his conviction that Marx’s template for social reform remained woefully inadequate, full of holes and inanities that exposed the theorists’ ignorance of the real nature and consequences of poverty. “You cannot read the works of Marx without thinking that at least he never spoke to a workman in his life,” Shaw cheekily speculated (“Speech” 155). “But at least he did his work,” Shaw offered in the way of a complimentary qualification to his jabs at Marxism (“Speech” 155).

Moreover, the friction between the Fabian brand of Socialism and pure Marxism was not lost on Friedrich Engels. Though at times generous in his appraisals of Shaw’s contrary posture toward social reform, Engels did assail the Fabian cause in generally condescending terms, classifying Shaw and his ilk “a clique of bourgeois ‘Socialists’ of diverse calibers, from careerists to sentimental Socialists and philanthropists” (qtd. in Chen 162). Pinpointing what he perceived as the modus operandi for the Fabians’ aversion to violence, Engels later conjectured, “Fear of the revolution is their fundamental principle” (qtd. in Chen 162). As for Shaw, Engels confessed his admiration for the vocal socialistic enthusiast’s talent, but nevertheless dubbed him “absolutely
useless as an economist and politician” (qtd. in Chen 162). Engels is not unique in rendering this judgment of Shaw. Referencing the views of Chinese communist theorists, Wendi Chen claims that “in the eyes of a true socialist [as defined using strictly Marxist parameters], Shaw’s Fabian socialism was no more than quackery” (162).

However, despite Shaw’s disillusionment with the glacier-like pace of socialistic reform in Britain, history has borne out the overarching sensibility and prudence of many of Shaw’s suggestions on the proper social assumptions, political tactics and humanistic considerations for effective, manageable socialistic reform. Shaw correctly intuited that Karl Marx “was too inexperienced in technical government and administration and too melodramatic in his hero-contra-villain conception of the class struggle, to foresee the actual process by which his generalization would work out, or the part to be played in it by the classes involved” (qtd. in Williams 146). Notwithstanding, Shaw’s at times derisory censure of traditional Marxist philosophy should not be construed as evidence that he possessed nothing touching real reverence for (or indebtedness to) Karl Marx, the ground-breaking writer and thinker. Though William Irvine postulates while “never a Marxist in the strict sense, Shaw is too skillful a propagandist not to exploit the power that Marxist phrases have gained over the popular mind,” Shaw himself dismissed the supposition that his affiliation with Marx can be accurately characterized sheerly as exploitative in a rhetorical or literary sense (71). In an address to Labour party colleagues and admirers in 1926, one year after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, the dramatist expressed both his tremendous regard and considerable reservations about the venerated progenitor and icon of socialist theory while evaluating the progress of the socialist cause:
Fortunately, I think we have good intentions. But that is not enough. We must also not run after great men. Socialism did produce a great man in Karl Marx. Many of us would say that Karl Marx produced socialism. Well, I have read Karl Marx, and I can find nothing in him about socialism. But he did the greatest literary feat a man can do. Marx changed the mind of the world” (“Speech” 154).

George Bernard Shaw confronted conventional assumptions, prejudices, and even the logical shortcomings and strategic ambiguities inherent to the framework of Marxist theory and to Karl Marx’s radical prescription for social revolution. Moreover, it appears broadly speaking that in the wake of the sprawling 20th century experiment involving fully implemented communist and socialist programs across the face of Europe, South America and Asia, the contest for supremacy and efficacy has been won by the most moderate, democratic iterations of socialism. Therefore, Shaw’s provocative suggestions toward refining and augmenting socialist thought, values and strategy have proven not only acutely insightful and ultimately useful, but perhaps more impressively, uniquely prescient as well.

Nevertheless, one can safely argue that Shaw’s dramatic and political literature is at least fraught with a pervasive philosophical ambivalence toward Karl Marx. As Irvine summarizes the paradoxical sympathies of George Bernard Shaw, “His sense of humor, his sense of legality, his aversion to violence, his middle class intellectualism were against [Marx’s radical solutions to the class struggle]. His hatred of philistinism, his Puritan predilection for the honesty of root-and-branch reform, his growing distrust of democracy and gradualism were for it” (68). Shaw’s creative personality and genius—a bundling of middle-class economic sensibilities, intellectual aversion to overly simplistic and idealistic platitudes, and a quintessentially modern penchant for healthy, reserved
skepticism with respect to anything smacking of a utopian vision for universal economic parity—checked his loyalties to Marxist socialism.

However, the playwright’s work was also fueled by an unquenchable passion for reform and an undeterred conviction that humanity could, by virtue of tapping into the moral greatness of exceptional individuals of influence, transcend the social and economic inequities plaguing modern societies. And that innate passion, first stoked by Karl Marx, forever seared into his person an abiding deference for the father of Socialist thought. Shaw fundamentally conceived of social reform as finding its genesis in democratic political renovation spawned by the middle class, the effects of which would subsequently trickle down into the laboring classes. Nevertheless, though Shaw rebuffed the Marxist notion that effectual economic reform would take root in the soil of impoverished labor and subsequently swell into a massive, radical and violent revolutionary movement, he nevertheless drew his political inspiration from the enduring muse of socialism and used Marxism as the platform from which the Fabian brand of socialism was launched.
Works Cited


CHAPTER II
THE RADICAL AMONG REVOLUTIONARIES

“Orwell in fact seems to have wanted socialism on condition that it would not be run by socialists.”

- Robert Conquest²

From the borderline bourgeois middle class that George Bernard Shaw so deeply esteemed was soon to emerge a rival to his position as nettlesome pariah of far-left, Marxist Socialism. Though on a scale of literary volume and critical acclaim far outstripped by Bernard Shaw, the satiric novelist and essayist George Orwell filled a symbolic vacuum of vociferous criticism left by Shaw in his waning years. Moreover, Orwell in subsequent decades became, at least within Western popular consciousness, an iconic authorial personage who eclipsed even Shaw’s prominence in the big picture of 20th century politics. Partly owing to his literary penchant for spinning fables and futuristic apocalyptic scenarios into excoriating indictments of Stalinism, and for hanging his last novels on totemic and memorable symbols and slogans—“Big Brother is watching you,” “Some animals are more equal than other animals”—Orwell has become a popular historical figure synonymous with anti-communism. More significantly,

² “Orwell, Socialism and the Cold War,” The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell, p. 127.
largely as a product of anxieties surrounding the protracted Cold War between Russia and the democratic West, Orwell has been not only thrust into modern cultural consciousness, but also, arguably, subsumed into a wider arena of democratic literature that tends toward obscuring his actual objections to real world applications of Socialist theory.

What is of greatest note to left-wing, Marxian critics of Orwell was his propensity to assault the theoretical, and in Orwell’s view, empirically unfounded strains of Marxist thought. Orwell sharply condemned the totalitarian applications of socialist reform prevailing over Eastern Europe—applications which, broadly speaking, delighted many British socialists, including at times Shaw himself—in the mid-1900s as a certain road to political perdition and the eventual abolition of individual democratic freedoms. Given the residual backlash to Orwell’s censure of communist and Stalinist modes of social revolution—based on the author’s alleged anti-intellectualism, snobbery, and deft, but deceptive manipulation of literary voice in the service of his critiques—this chapter will briefly trace the personal origins of Orwell’s thinking on socialism. It will also qualify his stark, unrelenting aversion toward totalitarian Stalinism. Much like Bernard Shaw, George Orwell took a rhetorical chisel to the over-blown and empirically suspect contours of Marxist theory via piquant and ingenious literary inventions of his own like *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In view of current history, his observations and complaints, much like Shaw’s, have proven considerably more prescient, rational and palatable than the dismissive and at times brutal ripostes of his political foes on the far-left wing of 20th century socialism.

At the root of Orwell’s success and relevance as a novelist and a socialist thinker was his almost iconoclastic style and intrepidly realistic approach to political prose-
writing. Anthony Shuttleworth has noted, “In a series of uncommonly insightful texts Orwell brought a substantial literary intelligence to bear on the obsessions of the decade—poverty, social justice, imperialism, fascism—while at the same time seeking to develop an inclusive attention to the details which characterized his era” (204). Yet Orwell’s singular style and incisiveness at times brought him into sharp relief with his Marxist contemporaries’ theoretical prejudices and political biases. Shuttleworth points out that “a controversial figure, not to say a controversialist, during the period itself, Orwell became in the postwar period perhaps the most problematic writer for those seeking to make sense of the possibilities, dangers and achievements of the period” (204). Consequently, an ideologically-driven, frequently contradictory and often embittered haze has settled over Orwell’s work, casting modern criticism of the author’s polemical writings in a somewhat ambiguous light. The perplexing inconsistencies of modern Orwell criticism appear primarily attributable to the divergent assumptions and resentments guiding much of the work produced by recent literary and political critics. Therefore, one must first assess the foundations of Orwell’s political sentiments and forage through a few of his formative experiences as a budding socialist in order to better parse his later fiction and, hopefully, lend critical balance to some of the pedantic, agenda-driven criticism of Orwell.

It is difficult to deny that, as Stephen Ingle remarks, “Much of Orwell’s enduring reputation was the consequence of his anti-totalitarian, and specifically anti-Stalinist, polemics” (2). However, Orwell’s critical framework for political theory appears to have originated in his brief and disparate stints as British Imperial officer and subsequently as member and soldier for the POUM (Worker’s Party) during the Spanish
Civil War. Reared in a middle-class background, the young Etonian George Orwell (given name Eric Blair) likely harbored his share of patriotic, ethnocentric sentiments, despite affiliations with socialists fairly early in his career. Nevertheless, a brief term in colonial Burma as part of the machinery of the highly inefficient and undeniably oppressive British Raj cemented Orwell’s socialist convictions once and for all. The experience jarred the young Blair out of his provincial preconceptions not only of British imperialism, but more significantly, of the tragic shortcomings of capitalism for all societies—whether colonizing or colonized.

Orwell’s true awakening to social realities appears to have taken hold while wielding the sliver of imperial power at his disposal, filling a repugnant post as overlord to the largely ignorant and enslaved Burmans. The squalid environs of his temporary post in Burma indelibly imprinted themselves on his fertile brain and politically conscious soul. For this reason, Orwell made it a point—for political as well as, one could assume, literary reasons—to tread the same path and endure the same incommodities as the working class for much of his life, whether in Spain, France or Burma. As George Watson notes, “To discover, as an Etonian of utopian-socialist views, the realities of working-class life was plainly shattering, and [Orwell] urgently seeks to share his sense of astonishment with his readers” (98). Moreover, semi-autobiographical works like his essay “Shooting an Elephant” and the novel Burmese Days catalogue some of the egregious and objectionable incidents that impelled Orwell to a life of political and literary activism.

Orwell’s political ideology appears to have been governed, as Watson renders it, by “the reflection that poverty can only be understood by those who have endured it”
This underpinning conviction helps explain the often bleak, unsparing record of sordid or violent details in Orwell’s fictional writings. Watson argues that for George Orwell (as for Jack London), “Squalor is the hallmark of both writers, as a topic, and still more the moral compulsion to sink oneself in it” (95). In this respect, more than perhaps any other, Orwell’s life imbued his writing with an exceptional and hard-won credibility that other socialist writings from the period lack. Ian Williams insightfully notes that unlike many more sheltered, well-educated socialists, “Orwell had gone beyond the event horizon for the middle class of Britain. With an outsider’s senses, for example, of smell, he had gone to a different social planet—and discovered intelligent life there” (102).

Like his literary predecessor Bernard Shaw, Orwell would have found it embarrassing, if not outright appalling, that Karl Marx had so little experience among the working classes of France. The Ivory Towers of academic theory could not be expected to serve as the revolutionary starting point for anything approaching a robust revolution of the lower classes. Ironically, on these same grounds, Orwell might have turned a skeptical eye toward the political posturing of Shaw, who also had comparatively little experience among the impecunious to inform his socialistic outlook.

What is more, Orwell constructed his brand of socialism from the plethora of experiences, sceneries and encounters that he documented among the poorest classes of Europe and abroad. This effort lent his work credibility but also served to furnish his writings with brutally realistic assessments of the effects and consequences of poverty. Like Shaw, Orwell neither felt nor endorsed a rose-colored middle-class sentimentality about the collective innocence and unselfish ambitions of the working class. With reference to Orwell’s experiences among the indigent of society, George Watson avers
(as if in echo of Bernard Shaw), “The poor, again, can be extremely snobbish, insisting on the ritual observance of distinctions within their own class as well as between themselves and the rich. Hierarchy is not imposed from above, as Orwell discovered as a dishwasher in a luxury hotel in Paris: it is demanded from below” (98).

Nevertheless, Orwell evinced a richer, more deep-seated enthusiasm for the working class than Shaw ever articulated or would ever have embraced. As Ian Williams says, “Indeed, Orwell went beyond accepting that the poor are different. He decided that they were better, in their ethics, their social cohesion and even their patriotism. The latter concept was, of course, anathema to orthodox Marxists who held that the working class has no country” (102). Orwell’s politically-oriented literature always derived from his first-hand observations of impoverished society and the convictions that germinated in these formative experiences—whether complimentary of laboring classes or not.

Similarly, while allied with the anti-fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell brushed up against the inherent hazards and ineluctable violence of communist revolution, even while serving its cause as a militia member of the POUM in the bloody 1930s conflagration among rival socialistic movements. Enveloped with violence and political intrigue, Orwell witnessed personally the devastation wrought by large-scale revolution on the morale and pure ideology of the war’s grassroots revolutionaries. Indeed, Watson discusses Orwell’s aversion to murder and bloodshed, suggesting that the political thinker’s observances of immense pain and senseless destruction colored his ruminations on Marxist revolution for years to come (97). Perhaps more significantly, though, Orwell discovered during the 1930s, and in the midst of the Spanish conflict, that, due to his criticisms of Stalinist tactics, his name was “on the Communist Party’s
blacklist” (Williams 105). Therefore, while enlisted to serve and sacrifice in the name of communist revolution, Orwell found himself officially labeled an enemy of the cause he endeavored and imperiled himself to advance. This confounding realization likely calcified Orwell’s already considerable intellectual and practical objections to many of the communist tactics and regimes proliferating in Eastern Europe during the early 20th century.

Orwell’s distaste for Stalinism and his unflinching depictions of poverty with all its admirable hardiness as well as its commensurate social blemishes have placed him at loggerheads with a host of Marxist thinkers (past and present), who have in retrospect tried to cast Orwell as fundamentally adversarial to real Socialism.\(^3\) Notwithstanding the occasionally substantive objections from socialist theorists and critics to Orwell’s criticisms of Marxist theory, a fair and comprehensive examination of Orwell’s life as well as his positions on economic revolution will certainly bear out his credentials as both a thoughtful and a passionate advocate of socialism.

As Ian Williams indicates, Orwell (much like Shaw) “defined himself specifically as a ‘democratic socialist’, thus intending to distance himself, and indeed socialism itself, from the various totalitarian tendencies that claimed, spuriously in his view, to be socialist” (100). Orwell’s official ties to socialist politics in Britain were admittedly tenuous, but are nonetheless verifiable from a historical standpoint as well as from Orwell’s own personal admissions. Stuart Hall has succinctly explained Orwell’s

\(^3\) Christopher Norris’s collection of leftist commentary on Orwell’s legacy, titled \textit{Inside the Myth}, provides several excellent essays on the matter of Marxist representation in Orwell’s literature. A sampling of criticisms from this work will be referenced later in this chapter.
acknowledged but reserved allegiance to the predominant socialist organizations of Britain in his time:

Orwell . . . had a very independent political formation as a socialist, which distinguished him from the majority of intellectuals who turned to the left in the 1930s. For whereas they fell under the orbit of the Communist Party and the Popular Front, Orwell’s formation was mainly in the orbit of the ILP [Independent Labour Party], an independent part of the left, opposed to the statism of both the Labour party and Stalinism. (219)

Later, Hall alleges that although Orwell acknowledged the useful power and scope of the Labour Party among other less puissant socialist blocs in British politics, “he never wrote or spoke of it seriously as a political vehicle which could bring about a fundamental shift of power” (220). Additionally, Ian Williams notes that “Orwell’s phobias included the labour leaders who had come up in the world, and he did not seem to relate strongly to the trade unions, the cooperative movement, and the other genuinely working class bodies that made up much of the Labour Party’s base in Britain” (103). Alex Zwerdling observes that Orwell’s “grudging support for the Labour Party was constantly undermined by his sense that it had betrayed part of the essential content of socialism: internationalism, absolute egalitarianism, and democracy” (31). Thus, according to Zwerdling’s view, Orwell castigated socialist organizations chiefly out of a purist and a pragmatic impetus to preserve the integrity of what he perceived to be the highest socialist objectives.

Notwithstanding this corroboration of his somewhat reserved support for British socialist groups, Orwell had several of his peers convinced that, whatever he stood for, it could not be unequivocally labeled socialism. In one interview, Frederic Warburg, the publisher of Orwell’s famed anti-Stalinist masterpiece Animal Farm, made reference to
Orwell’s rather ambiguous credentials as a leftist, remarking, “No, I don’t think he was ever a socialist, although he would have described himself as a socialist” (qtd. in Sedley 155). Moreover, according to Stephen Ingle, the critic Raymond Williams “depicted Orwell as a species of bourgeois ingénue who flirted un成功fully with and finally forsook socialism” (10). Despite the wealth of personal writing available to modern Orwell scholars, nailing down Orwell’s precise political and theoretical allegiances is an objective that has eluded scores of critics and generated a host of contradictory readings of his political writings. Some ambiguous readings of Orwell’s socialist affiliation proceed from leftist criticism, while other erroneous assumptions issue from the right, chiefly from those who wish to christen Orwell one of their own political flock. Furthermore, the dispute over Orwell’s allegiances to socialism seems to issue from an apparent conflict between Orwell’s stubborn and intuitive adherence to an individualist and literary outlook that clashed sharply with the predominantly collectivist and opportunistic ethic of socialism in his time. But in a few respects, Orwell’s political philosophy and moral convictions, irrespective of long-standing critical quarrels over Orwell’s socialist credentials, fall cleanly on the side of socialism.

First, Orwell repeatedly and vehemently conveyed his distrust and scorn for capitalism as an economic philosophy. As Stuart Hall comments, “Orwell thought that the Depression and the war had demonstrated the rottenness of capitalism and the need to plan. The war not only made the case for planning: it had advanced it practically. Many did see, in rationing and production for the war effort, the emergence of a sort of ‘war

---

4 This individualistic dynamic in Orwell’s writing marks Shaw’s political literature as well, a significant phenomenon that will be addressed at greater length in the third chapter of this paper.
socialism” (223). Furthermore, in reviewing Friedrich Hayek’s book *Road to Serfdom*, Orwell was confronted with “the premise that the freedoms of the individual (liberty) and free market competitive capitalism (the market) are identical, mutually interdependent and indivisible. Any movement away from them is a small step on the primrose path to totalitarianism” (Hall 237). Nevertheless, despite his sympathy with Hayek’s abhorrence of any incremental movement toward totalitarian measures of social control, Orwell could not swallow Hayek’s assertion that capitalism is in some way a preventative panacea to authoritarianism, instead turning “to argue that there is little evidence of the old ‘free market’ existing, even if that were what we wanted, since the predominant trend in capitalist economies was not towards liberty, competition and choice but towards concentration and monopoly” (Hall 237). In other words, Orwell’s criticisms of communist totalitarianism stemmed from the same emotional and rational objections that gave rise earlier in his life to a mistrust of capitalism—that is, his dread of an encroaching force (whether capitalist or communist in form) to trample or stifle the spread and preservation of individual liberties. On the other hand, one can assume that given a simple choice between socialism or capitalism, as distinct economic systems circumscribed in purely theoretical terms, Orwell’s sympathies fell consistently and rather emphatically on the side of socialism.

Additionally, in his work *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell makes his endorsement of an imminent and revolutionary end of capitalism in the wake of social revolution quite explicit, and he does so in terms that might rankle the more moderate Fabian, George Bernard Shaw:
The difference between Socialism and capitalism is not primarily a difference of technique. One cannot simply change from one system to the other as one might install a new piece of machinery in a factory, and then carry on as before, with the same people in positions of control. Obviously there is also needed a complete shift of power. New blood, new men, new ideas—in the true sense of the word, a revolution. (“The Lion” 83)

However, despite Orwell’s fervent endorsements and utilizing of an ideological framework rooted in revolutionary socialism, he nevertheless took sharp issue with what he saw as the vandalizing and hijacking of pure socialism in the 1930s by many on the extreme left—chiefly Marxists and Stalinists with lofty aims and paltry political scruples. Hence, as Shuttleworth points out, “With the close of the thirties … Orwell became best known as a commentator on the dangers of radical social movements” (204). Ingle notes that, in light of Orwell’s fervid objections to Stalinist communist tactics, he consequently and quite consciously became “a renegade, a word he used whimsically as a term of praise” (99).

In his time, Orwell remained unsatisfied, and progressively more horrified, with the socialist movement’s status quo. While, in Ian Williams’s words, Orwell ultimately formulated and hewed closely to “an empirical and pragmatic version” of socialism, he winced at the laziness and compromise on the part of his British allies and shuddered at the unscrupulous corruption on the part of Stalinists making headway in Eastern Europe (110). Furthermore, as Ingle notes, after some disillusioning and up close encounters with the at times perfidious operations of communist governments, Orwell found himself a committed and realistic socialist in an awkward but honest predicament. With respect to effecting socialistic revolution in the violent, censorial mode most appealing to his
political peers, “he had changed his mind, though unlike some he had not changed his side” (Watson 99).

Therefore, Christopher Norris’s suggestion that Orwell’s work amounts to nothing more substantive than a “point-for-point travesty of social argument” is not simply an unfounded claim, but a distortion of Orwell’s thinking on socialism (250). More accurately, Orwell’s propensity to ruthlessly apply empirical experience and foresight to his evaluation of Marxists’ highly theoretical and at times grossly simplistic formula for social revolution has long irked Orwell’s leftist foes in the greater war for socialism. As Zwerdling explains,

By constantly raising embarrassing questions about socialist assumptions, Orwell was trying to force the movement to scrutinize itself in order to determine whether it was built on reality or fantasy . . . . But one must keep in mind that the movement was his movement, its exposure his own, its failures ones he would feel deeply. Unlike many of his fellow socialists, however, he was unwilling to live a life of sustaining illusion. (15)

Notwithstanding Orwell’s at times vociferous objections to the tactics and aims of fellow socialists, he steadfastly upheld the cause of socialism throughout his short-lived career. Only later were his works truncated and contorted into something more potently and exclusively anti-communist. Some explain this political revisionism as the product of Orwell’s usefulness to anti-communists in the decades subsequent to Orwell’s death. Stephen Ingle, for instance, argues that Orwell’s anti-Stalinist writings and socialist legacy gradually became diluted by right wing agents until Orwell’s underlying commitment to socialism was finally drowned out in a subsequent recasting of his historical role as a Cold War anti-communist icon and spokesman (16). In view of this distortion of Orwell’s original objective, Ingle labors to emphasize that “Orwell was
trying to save the world for socialism as he understood it, and not for Western capitalism or for right-wing individualism” (2).

Furthermore, Stuart Hall notes that Orwell “was always thinking about the big, troubling questions of his time, trying to record and explain the contradictory pressures of being alive as a certain kind of socialist at one of the cross-roads of history” (238).

Consequently, the modern critic must not mistake Orwell’s frequently sardonic and controversial literary tone, particularly towards leftist political opponents and tenets, as token of a wider antagonism toward socialism itself. Orwell was simply a daring, resolute writer, unraveling the assumptions of prominent political theories in shark-infested political waters. A merely cursory examination of Orwell’s life, habits and personal writings would serve to diffuse the aforementioned suspicion of Orwell’s implicit capitalist or right wing sympathies. Nevertheless, distortions of Orwell’s intent as a political commentator and critic seem to have arisen precisely because he so intrepidly assailed Marxist assumptions regarded sacrosanct by the left. In order, then, to effectively dispel the allegations leveled at George Orwell by his leftist critics, it is essential to pinpoint exactly where Orwell’s commentary and criticism diverged first from the incipient socialistic theory of Karl Marx, and secondly, from the totalitarian applications of Marxist socialism gaining momentum in the mid-20th century.

Like Shaw, George Orwell, while an ardent devotee of socialist values and objectives, found his allegiance to the cause stymied by certain facets of Marxist theory. While some critics have successfully planted a persistent, discrediting rumor that Orwell was somehow too impatient or ignorant to read Karl Marx at all, most serious evidence suggests the contrary. Ian Williams, in a recently published essay, argues that despite an
unfortunate lack of clear evidence corroborating either position, it is certainly not unreasonable to assume that Orwell was not only familiar with Marx’s writing but may have “read Marx extensively” (105). Additionally, Alex Zwerdling, author of *Orwell and the Left*, argues with even greater conviction that “Orwell’s work indicates he had read Marx with care and understanding” (20).

Perhaps more significant than Orwell’s familiarity with Marxist theory, however, are his precise objections to certain of its more pronounced operative assumptions. Criticism of Orwell’s political writing has homed in on two strands of contention toward Marxism in his body of work: first, his disappointment in Marx’s scant experience with and misapprehension of the lifestyles and general ethos of the working poor, and second, his concern that Marxist theory hinged on a flimsy, over-simplified materialist idealism that would render its application to real societies not only unproductive, but possibly dangerous to the cause of democratic liberty. In many respects, Orwell targeted the same idealistic Achilles’ heel in Marxism that drew vociferous criticism from Bernard Shaw. Moreover, like Bernard Shaw, Marx appears to have nevertheless retained Orwell’s sympathies in spite of drawing his strident criticism—only Marx’s theoretical prescription for desirable social reform was, in Orwell as in Shaw’s view, sorely lacking. As Zwerdling insightfully notes, Orwell’s “quarrel was not so much with Marx as with Marxism” (20).

As noted in the previous chapter, Shaw’s incredulity with respect to Marx’s naïve faith in the working class was based chiefly on Marx’s scant encounters with actual denizens of the working class. George Watson cites the astonishing report that “Marx, who lived for over thirty years in England after settling there in 1849, in the first
industrial nation on earth, is said never to have visited a factory in his life” (94). Orwell likewise shared Shaw’s concern relative to the dubious authority of socialism’s reputed progenitor on matters of poverty and revolution, given Marx’s apparent ignorance of the real nature and conditions of the lower class. Primarily, and more practically, Orwell doubted the extent to which the working class, particularly in Britain, would find any resonance in Marx’s theories.

It should be reiterated here that unlike Shaw Orwell did not doubt the essential moral capacity or the revolutionary faculties of the working class. In his expansive treatise *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell argued that the flattening of the revolutionary sails in Britain could be traced to the problem that “the entire English Socialist movement was unable to produce a version of Socialism which the mass of the people could even find desirable” (“The Lion” 93). For one, according to Orwell, a truly modern and efficacious Socialist party would “have recognised that the old-fashioned ‘proletarian revolution’ is an impossibility” (“The Lion” 93). As Orwell argues, one must understand that “England is more united than most countries, that the British workers have a great deal to lose besides their chains, and the differences in outlook and habits between class and class are rapidly diminishing” (“The Lion” 93). To Orwell, British socialism might even have to discard the internationalist sentiments that Marx so fastidiously championed, for as Orwell points out, the British, while “not cowards” are certainly not “internationally minded” (“The Lion” 87).

Additionally, Orwell found Marx’s resentment of and efforts to marginalize Britain’s middle class not only distasteful, but also entirely unproductive. In his writings, Orwell seems to reprovingly view Marxists and others in the British Labour Party of his
day as groups who imprudently “antagonised the middle class” (“The Lion” 93). Instead, what Orwell ultimately sought and advocated was

a Socialist movement which can swing the mass of the people behind it, drive the Pro-fascists out of positions of control, wipe out the grosser injustices and let the working class see that they have something to fight for, win over the middle classes instead of antagonising them, produce a workable imperial policy instead of a mixture of humbug and Utopianism, [and] bring patriotism and intelligence into partnership. (“The Lion” 94)

What stood in the way of this formula for fair and effective social reform, judging from Orwell’s reflections on the subject, was a morass of theoretical and idealistic tangles in Marxist thought, which contemporary acolytes of Marx nevertheless refused to abdicate. For instance, Orwell sternly upbraids “Marxist parties” for being “tied to the nineteenth-century doctrine of the class war” (“The Lion” 92). He comments that these idealistic factions within socialism “continued year after year to preach this out-of-date gospel, and never drew any inference from the fact that it got them no followers” (“The Lion” 92).

Pragmatic and objective-driven in his approach to politics, Orwell felt that Marxism, by its original blueprint, had proven defunct when applied to real European societies, particularly Great Britain. As Zwerdling observes, “Marx had seriously underestimated the adaptability of capitalism, the likelihood of political and economic reform, and the force of nationalism. Yet his disciples treated his theories as laws and his prophecies as facts. It was this dogmatic element in Marxism that Orwell found an intolerable obstacle to human progress” (20). Fortunately, Orwell, like Shaw, was an undaunted and unsparing critic of anything he perceived to be intellectual claptrap; “Orwell’s critique of Marxism,” therefore, “concentrated on what he took to be its anachronisms and untenable assumptions: its theories of class and revolution, its historicist tactics, its materialist basis
and consequent neglect of psychology, and its refusal to think seriously about the nature of a socialist state” (Zwerdling 21).

Materialism and statism, in particular, as Zwerdling mentions in the previous quote, stoked Orwell’s frustration with fundamentalist Marxism and its loyalists in the 20th century. Since Marx took as his starting point a materialist basis for all moral, economic and political considerations, his view of revolution and reform was, in Orwell’s view, tragically shortsighted and dangerously susceptible to manipulation by opportunistic power-mongers in nations where it was deployed. As Stuart Hall explains, “In classical Marxist terms, there could only be two possible types of state in the modern industrialized world: a capitalist bourgeois state or socialist/workers’ state (leading eventually to communism and the withering away of the state)” (230). But Orwell could not adopt the Marxist belief in, as Zwerdling puts it, “capitalist expropriation as the equivalent of all classes” (25). Taking Russia as his most pronounced and available example in the mid-1900s, Orwell cited the oppressive, domineering and unscrupulous Stalin administration as a direct refutation of Marx’s claim that class is entirely the by-product of capitalistic economies. Zwerdling paraphrases Orwell’s concern as follows: “If class divisions and the exploitation of man by man had survived a tremendous economic transformation like the Russian Revolution, such behavior might well have a noneconomic first cause” (26). Of even greater concern to Orwell, this crucial glitch in the materialistic framework for Marxist socialism also opened a gaping door in its derivative revolutions to the very real possibility of an interminable totalitarian regime at the helm of socialist nations for the foreseeable future.
Zwerdling encapsulates Orwell’s essential objection to Marxists’ materialist idealism nicely:

Too often, Marx’s disciples assumed that the only obstacle to socialism was the existence of capitalism, and that after the destruction of the capitalist system socialism must inevitably follow. The idea betrays its Rousseauistic roots; capitalist man is alienated and unnatural; socialist man will be free; socialism as a system will evolve naturally and create itself. Orwell feared such laissez-faire attitudes because he could not believe that only unselfish impulses would fill the vacuum created by the destruction of capitalism . . . . The forces that had produced the forms of oppression peculiar to capitalism would invent a new set of ‘socialist’ oppressions. Human freedom would not be served by a change of masters.

Bernard Shaw, as shown in the previous chapter, had advocated the use of a mediated revolution, a socialism which originated in the middle class employing standing political structures and hierarchies to effect social reforms that favored the working class. No doubt Orwell would have taken strong exception to this view, considering it an almost pedantic disqualification of the lower classes from assuming any agency in their own deliverance from capitalistic oppression. The lower class, Orwell would likely have argued, are not too ignorant for Marxism, only too sensible and practical to accept it as is. Nevertheless, the more absolute, ruthless and oligarchical approach to communist rule embraced by Stalin alarmed Orwell even more. Stalin deployed a mode of Marxism Stuart Hall describes as “oligarchical collectivism”—essentially, a political predicament in which “so-called ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ societies could similarly become state-collectives and planned in character without delivering socialism, in the sense of ending the exploitation of the masses” (229).

Orwell’s well-warranted trepidation that the advent of socialism in Eastern Europe was shaping up to assume a more oppressive and economically exploitative
character than the capitalism that preceded and presumably justified it provided the impetus for his last and best-known novels—*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Through these works, Orwell unleashed a battery of forceful and memorable salvos against the totalitarian statism that he feared would, if left unchecked, eventually preclude any real chance for democratic socialism in Europe. His objections to totalitarianism, based on both conjecture and observance, can be distilled to the grave presentiment that an oligarchical state, even built on a socialistic pretext, would ineluctably eradicate the individual rights and opportunities of the masses it purports to serve.

Along these same lines, Zwerdling comments that a “serious objection to Marxism” likely shared by Orwell “was that its conviction of the inevitable triumph of socialism legitimised any method of reaching it” (23). Worse yet, the aforementioned conviction might, even on the heels of a successful workers’ revolution, have “led to the confusion of state ownership with socialism and discouraged Marxist thinkers from insisting on safeguards to protect and preserve the newly won freedom of the working class” (Zwerdling 26). Orwell sensed that totalitarianism’s abridgements of democratic freedom in the name of Marxist socialism had already begun to envelop Russia and that enthusiasm about the clearly dramatic and indisputably socialist results of an iron-fisted approach to class revolution might intoxicate the rest of Europe, blinding socialists to the inherent dangers of Stalinist communism.

Leftist critic Stephen Sedley argues that “no honest socialist or communist ignores or underrates the structural and political problems and distortions which have characterised the Soviet Union and other states that have taken a similar path,” conceding that Orwell’s derisive revolutionary slogan “‘more equal than others’ is a barb which has
stuck painfully in the consciousness of the left” (158). For Orwell, one could not stress enough the tremendous and potentially irrevocable dangers of acquiescing to totalitarianism for the sake of obtaining the socialistic redistribution of resources. As George Watson notes, Orwell feared that, despite his admiration and confidence in the common sense, heroism and hardiness of his fellow Englishmen, London might not have shared his “understanding of the imminent menace of totalitarianism” (95). So he assailed Stalinism and Marxism in his final literary works with a ferocity that still rings in the ears of leftist thinkers and critics today.

Orwell was so adverse to Stalin’s methodologies that he was even willing to abjure socialism altogether if only to forestall the creeping onset of totalitarianism. He once commented, “By bringing the whole of life under the control of the state, socialism necessarily gives power to an inner ring of bureaucrats, who in almost every case will be men who want power for its own sake and will stick at nothing in order to retain it . . . . The only salvation lies in returning to an unplanned economy, free competition, and emphasis on liberty rather than on security” (qtd. in Hall 236-37). Though Orwell’s sympathies consistently lined up to the values and principles of Socialism, a brand of socialist government that could not be reconciled to democratic values was not in Orwell’s view preferable to even a largely defective, inequitable capitalist system that might nevertheless permit democratic liberty to survive within certain unavoidable confines.

Among the values that Orwell feared would be relinquished or stamped out under statist socialism was first and foremost the integrity and agency of the individual in both creating and maintaining the sovereignty of a socialist state. In a letter to the Partisan
Review in 1946, Orwell remarked, “You can’t have a revolution unless you make it for yourself: there is no such thing as a benevolent dictatorship” (qtd. in Ingle 15). Where Shaw detected Marx’s error in investing too much faith in the laboring masses, Orwell suggested that in at least this one respect, Marx could not have been emphatic enough—a socialist government must be, down to the most banal policy and revolutionary tactic, by the people, for the people. To neglect this imperative is de facto to hand the reins of not only the revolution, but also its subsequent administration, to ruthless power-mongers.

For this reason, Orwell questioned even the Fabian (and more moderate) form of socialism meticulously detailed and championed by Shaw, since this “curiously administrative” model for reform appeared liable to the same fundamental assumption that “the planned society was . . . the equivalent of the classless one” (Zwerdling 35). This is not to say that Orwell can be classed with the faction of social anarchists Shaw so rigorously refuted in his defense of a socialism hatched from within parliamentary government.5 Zwerdling elucidates that Orwell believed not in abolishing all centralized government but “mak[ing] sure that the powerful government which seemed inevitable was democratically elected, restrained by law, and subject to recall” (30). Orwell winced at any suggestion that individual rights—particularly freedom of literary and political expression—would be nullified within a socialist system. Orwell prized intellectual and literary liberty, one could argue, above all other concerns, even, it would appear, above his dream of economic parity for all social classes. For Orwell saw, latent to Stalinist modes of enforcement and redistribution, a potential for the deplorable suppression of

---

5 See Chapter I, p. 12, for a discussion of Shaw’s repudiation of anarchic approaches to social revolution.
alternative viewpoints, no matter how forceful or objective their merits. Stuart Hall feels that “Orwell’s individualism gave him a basic orientation to politics which was fundamentally alien to the statist notion of ‘bringing socialism to the masses’ through the imposition of state dictatorship and, indeed, to the whole tradition which identified socialism with collectivism and state control” (219). It is this individualism that he dubs “Orwell’s instinctive libertarianism” (219). Consequently, “what he hated about the fellow-traveling, left-wing intellectuals,” avers Hall, “was their willingness to subordinate themselves to the party line and to give up thinking for themselves” (219).

In keeping with this individualistic impulse, Orwell took a hard line against any suggestion that the preservation of an effective socialist government would have to come at the expense of plenary speech rights. For instance, Ian Williams has noted that Orwell “opposed the blacklisting and repressive action against individual fascists and communists alike, hewing to a higher, inexpedient, standard of civil liberties” (109). Moreover, Orwell felt that something transcending political expediency was at stake in conceding controls on speech for the sake of preserving socialist rule. A carefully organized mendacity “is something integral to totalitarianism,” Orwell wrote in the 1946 essay “The Prevention of Literature,” “something that would still continue even if concentration camps and secret police forces had ceased to be necessary” (63). “Totalitarianism demands, in fact,” Orwell continued, “the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth” (“Prevention” 63-64).

For Orwell, this aspect of totalitarianism fueled his personal quest to thwart its progress in Europe. He appears to have feared the quashing of individualism itself in the
wake of a forceful push from totalitarian regimes for enforced collectivism and
conformity to the state line on matters economic, philosophical and even artistic. The
sincere or skeptical writer, then, had no reasonable place in the new socialist world.
Orwell saw the writing on the wall for journalists, critics and, particularly, fiction writers
who hoped to persevere in their craft once totalitarian rule held sway. Orwell deemed
this an impossible hope: “It is at the point where literature and politics cross that
totalitarianism exerts its greatest pressure on the intellectual” (“Prevention” 64).

Moreover, he contested, “Such a society, no matter how long it persists, can never
afford to become either tolerant or intellectually stable. It can never permit either the
truthful recording of facts, or the emotional sincerity, that literary creation demands”
(“Prevention” 67). Addressing the perceived callousness of scientists who passively
looked on at Stalin’s suppression or outright persecution of writers in Russia, assuming
that scientific study was too useful to the government for its practitioners to fear any
attack from their communist supervisors, Orwell portentously warned, “They do not see
that any attack on intellectual liberty, and on the concept of objective truth, threatens in
the long run every department of thought” (“Prevention” 71). The ideal—one could say
the fundamentally democratic ideal—of individual expression and the prerogative to
exercise it freely by means of literature would face potential eradication if totalitarianism
were given unchecked control of socialist states.

For these reasons, Orwell staked out what many to this day (and particularly those
on the left) consider a posture of extreme and condemnatory opposition to the chief
pursuers of Marxism in his time, the communist revolutionists and their sympathizers
throughout Western Europe. As Robert Conquest states, “Orwell saw that totalitarianism
destroys efficiency, ease and security together with liberty, and because of the destruction of liberty” (130). Accordingly, Orwell viewed the Soviets and their literary proponents as “outright enemies” of “the onward march of socialism,” for their repudiation of democratic rule and the individualist values—like freedom of expression and faith in the common man—that underpin it (Williams 105).

Strikingly, however, Orwell’s advocacy of democratic socialism and, less surprisingly, his critical volleys at Marxist theory, have persistently drawn fire from Marxist critics since the publication of his strongest anti-Marxist sentiments in the 1940s. One might wonder how a fervent champion of literary rights and individual expression like George Orwell could manage to so rankle modern literary critics, yet scholarship assailing Orwell’s fictional satire and polemical essays, primarily on Marxist grounds, has staked out its territory in the wider field of Orwell criticism. Leveled primarily at Orwell’s stylistic and rhetorical choices, though also directed toward the content of his objections to statism and totalitarianism, I will show how this criticism is in many cases rife with contradictory assertions and questionable assumptions which appear to sideswipe Orwell’s fundamental objections to Marxist thought.

Dating back to the publication of Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four, leftists have construed Orwell’s onslaught of Stalinists as a definitive and unforgivable lapse in his socialist advocacy. Even the publisher of Nineteen Eighty-Four, despite acknowledging Orwell’s ideal of democratic socialism, took this line:

This story I take to be a deliberate and sadistic attack on socialism and socialist parties generally. It seems to indicate a final breach between Orwell and socialism, not the socialism of equality and human brotherhood, which Orwell clearly no longer expects from socialist parties, but the socialism of Marxism and the managerial revolution. [This
[Book] is worth a cool million votes to the Conservative party; it is imaginable that it might have a preface by Winston Churchill after whom its hero is named. (qtd. in Hall 225)

More acutely, leftist critics have taken issue with Orwell’s failure to recognize the necessity of at least a draconian phase of socialist administration in the ultimate establishment of a just and effective socialist nation-state. But most revealingly, socialist critics of Orwell indict what they perceive as his anti-intellectualism, crude grandiosity and manipulation of voice that serves as a siren call to those waffling between socialism and capitalism. Orwell, they argue, sells them out in a manner that undercuts socialism altogether when he assails an admittedly pockmarked, but noble run at socialist goals in Communist Russia. As Stephen Ingle indicates, tough Orwell critics like Raymond Williams felt that “Orwell helped to prepare the mainstream Left for post-war accommodation to capitalism by virtue of his pessimism” vis-à-vis socialism in the modern world (10).

Curiously, Orwell’s harshest socialist critics appear to fault their subject more for the subtleties of his tone and the style of his Marxist criticism than for its actual polemical content. One must almost presume, given the emphases of prominent leftist treatments of Orwell, that 20th century failures to implement socialism are traceable to its careless rhetorical packaging rather than to its tendency toward suppressing and marginalizing, rather than elevating, the working class. Thus, Orwell, who took communists to task on matters of substantive difference, would likely be surprised at how many of his detractors train their critical sights instead on peripheral matters like the rhetorical style of and point of view in his works, rather than the direct content of his objections to Marxism or Stalinism.
Leftist critics often purport to spotlight inconsistencies of a rational character in Orwell’s writings, but their analyses stop short of exposing any actual fallacies or inaccuracies in Orwell’s political rhetoric. For instance, Christopher Norris, editor and contributor to the book *Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views from the Left*, considers Orwell’s work manifestly riddled with “all the blindspots and irrational regressions of empiricist ideology” (261). In an earlier passage, he asserts, “It is for critics on the left to point out the varieties of false logic and crudely stereotyped thinking that produced this vision of terminal gloom” (11). Setting aside for the moment the stickiness of trying to unravel the phrase “empiricist ideology” (perfect fodder for a discussion of Doublethink, one might point out), the essays that follow this marching order from Norris are themselves populated with knotty and convoluted representations of Orwell’s theory and style. In fact, Norris in his introduction admits that “most varieties of ‘left’ criticism tend to take a negative or strongly demythologizing view of whatever they interpret” (8). His colleagues’ contributions to the volume (as we will later see) do not belie this assumption. For at times their ambitions to expose Orwell’s flawed thinking on the matter of socialism pan out as mere exercises in critical sophistry aimed at discrediting Orwell’s rhetorical methods rather than his actual opinion.

What seems to trouble Orwell’s leftist critics is the mere fact that he is taken seriously by so many readers, scholarly or otherwise. Some insist that Orwell’s work betrays a dearth of formal training in political theory and a paucity of serious reading. According to Stephen Ingle, “[Orwell’s] lack of an informed knowledge of philosophical and psychological issues limited the scope of his writing” (6). However, Zwerdling avers that it was on precisely psychological grounds—specifically, Marx’s failure to account
for the psychological impulse toward hierarchical control and snobbery—that Orwell attacked Marx’s materialism (26). And if Orwell’s dissection of doublethink in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fails to illustrate his acuity respecting human psychology, then little else could furnish him a better credential as a psychologically intuitive writer.

Furthermore, the intriguing suggestion that Orwell’s writing shows signs of vulgar anti-intellectualism, an allegation that emerges in several samples of leftist criticism of Orwell, illustrates the sort of perfunctory analysis typical of some leftist treatments of Orwell. Stuart Hall, for one, has insinuated that Orwell lacked the acumen to match his posthumous status as a celebrated political writer. “[Orwell’s] overt anti-intellectualism,” he writes, “is one of his most consistent, and least attractive qualities . . . . One cannot therefore expect to disinter fully-formed explanatory theories from Orwell’s fictional and journalistic writing” (238). Earlier in his essay, Hall even characterizes Orwell as “antipathetic to anything overly abstract, analytic or intellectual” (238). Nevertheless, Orwell’s momentous impact on the world of political theory—giving rise, for instance, to descriptive and almost categorical labels like “Orwellian”—at the very least validates the scholarly relevance of his ideas, if not their outright brilliance. How, moreover, has Orwell’s political writing generated such a wealth of criticism, if not for its theoretical depth and critical fertility? William Shakespeare, by Hall’s essential argument, could just as easily be classified as an “anti-intellectual” for tailoring his sense of dramatic humor to the common theatergoers rather than the scholars who would pore over his work in subsequent centuries.

Another class of socialist critics, including Beatrix Campbell, levies their criticisms from the opposite direction, charging that Orwell was essentially an erudite
prig who unfairly assumed the role of intellectual proxy for the poor against the insidious hazards of socialism. Borrowing the infamous slogan of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Campbell indicts Orwell for having a “big brotherly view of the working class” (126). Orwell, in her view, buys into the stale cliché that the poor are repellent and helpless, an obvious sign that he was unmistakably out of touch with the laboring class of his day. In short, Orwell offers readers “the quaint, old-fashioned chronicle of a self-confessed snob” (127). “Despite his wish to invest revolutionary optimism in the people,” she contends, “what he feels for the common people edges on contempt” (127).

Though in one sense, her characterization of Orwell has merit; like Bernard Shaw, Orwell emerged from the middle class and at times expressed a certain aversion to the vulgar habits and thoughtlessness of the impoverished class. The balance of criticism on Orwell’s life and writings, however, overwhelmingly substantiates a conclusion directly contrary to Campbell’s. Unlike the bourgeois maven Bernard Shaw, Orwell plunged himself into the squalid ranks and ethos of the uncommonly common man, chiefly in order to amass real life experiences to complement his intellectual convictions relative to socialism. This may, in fact, be the very reason that Hall and others find Orwell’s vulgar pragmatism, as they see it, so odious; perhaps they are reacting in his writing not to anti-intellectualism, but to a lingering scent of proletarian sensibilities, values, experiences (and even their innate objection to intellectual pretense) that rubbed off on Orwell in his early life and which colored his writing thereafter. More importantly, it may be these stark and indelible experiences among the working class that served to inform Orwell’s pragmatic and democratic instincts respecting socialism while simultaneously nullifying for Orwell the stultifyingly theoretical and impractical formulas embedded in Marxism.
Furthermore, even Campbell stumbles over her own interpretation of Orwell, conceding that somehow in spite of his snobbishness he nevertheless “celebrates” the “heroism” of many among the working class in his novel *Road to Wigan Pier* (128-29). She later qualifies this observation of Orwell’s manifest admiration for laborers with the confusing and largely unsupported claim that Orwell’s praise must be token of a condescending and chauvinistic regard for the impoverished (129). Perhaps the apparent contradiction, picked up on by Campbell, is better explained by Orwell’s patent sympathy with and admiration for the working man, a sentiment which was frequently balanced, nevertheless, by an equally honest revulsion at the lamentable condition—moral, financial and otherwise—to which this very class of victims were consigned.

The lightning rod for leftist criticism of Orwell, however, remains his legacy as “honest George,” the residual cultural perception of Orwell as an unapologetic purveyor of truths that exposed, on behalf of the regular guy, the shortcomings of socialistic theory. Chiefly, socialist critics of Orwell’s work will frequently cite his clever rhetorical stratagem of presenting himself as a regular fellow trying to unmask the subtle, pernicious tendencies of communism on behalf of the common man. “In this way,” comments Alan Brown, “the ‘eternal’ role of the artist as truth-teller is harnessed to a political function. Experience, common sense, realism and honesty are each facets of a total and manufactured personality. Taken together, they provide a platform from which political attitudes can be put across in education without suspicion of bias or indoctrination” (45). Orwell, according to Brown, employs (or perhaps “manufactures”) a winsome and plausible, but artificial, personality to conceal his propagandistic aims to
inoculate the masses against socialism, all the while careful to ensure that his “viewpoint systematically erases the tracks of its own political bias” (47).

Brown correctly identifies and assesses one of the most fascinating, effective and distinctly enduring qualities of Orwell’s writing. However, his corresponding suggestion that Orwell assumes this seemingly unimpeachable voice (or perhaps personage) in his writing to conceal a subtle tendentiousness represents an unwarranted leap from helpful observation to judgmental critical speculation. Indeed, his allegation of duplicitous political propagandizing inherent to Orwell’s fiction (and narrative personae) betrays an important critical assumption. Brown appears to believe that there is something morally suspect about using rhetorical ethos in any form to persuade one’s readers of a concern respective to the political future of socialism. Furthermore, his argument begs an important and relevant literary question. Can effective literary conventions not be applied to political persuasion? Brown seems to regard this choice on Orwell’s part as intrinsically unethical, but upon what moral grounds does he base this judgment? Moreover, how is an effort to persuade readers an indication of “bias” in a morally questionable sense? For his supposition about Orwell to hold more weight, Brown should enumerate actual errors in Orwell’s political philosophy, rather than simply indicting Orwell on the basis of employing an allegedly fraudulent (meaning, apparently, fictive) point of view in his writing.

Several other critics have applied a critical eye to Orwell’s uncanny gift for using a particularly resonant type of narrative perspective to enhance the credibility of his writing. Stephen Ingle, a much more balanced and generous critic of Orwell, similarly acknowledges that the persona of George Orwell became “a literary contrivance that
enabled its creator to champion the values of ordinary people” (5). Additionally, Anthony Shuttleworth references how, in spartan, unflinching descriptions of squalor and injustice, Orwell disguises a highly credible but ultimately artificial rendering of the real experiences of the laboring classes (207). Again, though, Orwell brings to his literature imagery and descriptions borne of experiences in battle, service to the British Empire and the hardships of personal poverty. Indeed, some of his fiction, like *Burmese Days* and “Shooting an Elephant” is richly autobiographical, whether in capturing cultural detail or depicting actual events. Thus, to broadly characterize Orwell’s fiction as misrepresentative of “real” poverty or laborers seems not only a difficult claim to substantiate in light of Orwell’s life experiences, but antagonistic to Orwell’s perspective.

Raymond Williams first coined the critical notion of Orwell as a literary charlatan, foisting his biased reflections on the multitudes by portraying himself as a tabula rasa constantly “bumping” into profound truths about power and democracy, but many critics have since seized on this notion (qtd. in Shuttleworth 205). Interestingly, if Williams’s critical inference about Orwell’s narrative duplicity is taken to be accurate, this criticism of Orwell if nothing else speaks to Orwell’s remarkable rhetorical acumen and political sagacity. Nevertheless, to argue, as Shuttleworth does with reference to several of Orwell’s works, that “Orwell’s project becomes, then, not of considering what one can be certain of, but of exploring what it is to be certain” seems, at best, a rash critical leap (208). Sifting clear examples of rhetorical posturing from authentic personhood in Orwell’s fiction misses the fundamental point that Orwell, as Ingle puts it, “was what he wrote” (22). It is hard to imagine a writer who does not inject artifice into his or her literary point of view for the sake of style, but what seems a source of greater
vexation to Shuttleworth and others is that Orwell executed this literary strategy so effectively.

In a more comprehensive analysis of his writings, Orwell’s epistemic considerations comprise only a portion of his larger work. The assertion that Orwell pulled the wool over the eyes of critics and common readers by posing as a regular fellow may serve to refute the previous claim that Orwell was only a political neophyte and intellectual dunce with a knack for spinning clever stories, but it does not appear to hold water in view of Orwell’s broader experiences and political activism. What matters more is whether Orwell was fully convinced of the positions he staked in his writings, something which (rather like Shaw) his unremitting doggedness on these points bears out, and secondly, whether he was, in today’s best estimation, right about Socialism.

George Orwell labored to reverse the tide of totalitarianism in his day and, ultimately, to preserve democratic freedoms for posterity. However, as leftist critics frequently point out, he simultaneously eroded the solidarity of the political left in the crucial span of time during and immediately after World War II. My intent is not to dispute the grains of truth certainly floating in each of the aforementioned criticisms by Orwell’s fellow socialists. For instance, though Orwell was as thoroughly intellectual and sophisticated as most of his political and literary rivals, Orwell did, in George Watson’s account, harbor a revulsion for literary wordsmiths like James Joyce who, despite their great talents, skirted on the peripheries of reality out of an aesthetic preference for the fantastical rather than a thirst for reshaping the broken world that was (101).
But Orwell’s preference for striking a populist tone and tailoring his rhetorical and creative choices to the common reader was not without significant moral and practical justification. Orwell once remarked to an acquaintance at a dinner party that “one should never write anything that a working man could not understand” (Ingle 21). In Ingle’s incisive view, this pivotal departure from so many of his political and literary peers, “is the mark of his genius, to which everything else in his life, more or less, was sacrificed” (21). In retrospect, then, one can trace both the critical scorn of Orwell’s eccentricity and the political ire of his works to his overriding sympathy for the poor and his unflagging devotion to individual democratic ideals.

Nonetheless, efforts to demythologize and debunk Orwell have persisted in leftist critical circles and will likely continue to haunt Orwell’s legacy as an enduring icon of the 20th century socialist movement. Despite his noble efforts to resist overbearing statism, what he saw as the outworn tropes of fundamental Marxism, as well as a propensity within socialist revolutions for oligarchy and oppression, many socialists refuse to forgive Orwell for his public break with the hardline Marxist position at a crucial juncture in the communist renovation of Eastern Europe. Moreover, Christopher Norris is right in asserting that Orwell has been “taken over triumphantly by those who hold him up as the great example of a socialist who finally saw the light” (7). It is difficult to deny that, at least in some noticeable measure, Orwell’s legacy has been subjected to critical and popular distortion by a “right-wing recuperative reading which has turned Orwell into the patron saint of current Cold-War doublethink” (Norris 7). Notwithstanding this curious, revisionist phenomenon surrounding the mythos of Orwell,
he was still undeniably a socialist—though an eccentrically pragmatic and individualistic species of socialist.

George Orwell sought to galvanize and enlighten the working class of Britain in the direction of democratic socialism in the mid-20th century. His sympathies with the impoverished and uneducated man were clear, as was his penchant for advocating individual rights (including the right to one’s own literary prerogative) over and against the tantalizing allure of establishing a formidable and formal socialism. Economically and politically speaking, Orwell’s vision for socialistic reform of Britain was unequivocal: “We have got to break the grip of the moneyed class. England has got to assume its real shape. The England that is only just beneath the surface, in the factories and the newspaper offices, in the aeroplanes and submarines, has got to take charge of its own destiny” (“The Lion” 86). However, for this comprehensive and dramatic reform to succeed in a lasting or thoroughly democratic mode, its administration could not be concentrated in the avaricious, ambitious hands of a tight and militaristic cabal. Thus Orwell, aghast at the excesses and abridgments of individual rights reported of Stalin’s purportedly socialist government, saw the ominous writing on the wall for his dream of legitimate democratic socialism. He therefore launched a literary offensive on not only the insidious mechanics and potential consequences of tolerating totalitarian rule, but what he viewed as its latent justification and tactical inspiration in the works of Karl Marx.

As George Orwell wrote, Marxist socialism never “touched the heart of the English people” (“The Lion” 101). Nevertheless, its most stalwart adherents, much to Orwell’s frustration, continued to defend the integrity of a Marxist revolution and model
for government to several generations of primarily unconvinced British spectators.

Perhaps the political doggedness of these Marxists stems from a phenomenon that George Watson describes in his book *The Lost Literature of Socialism*. “Socialism … never allowed itself the liberty to fail,” Watson writes. “Its claim to know how the industrial world must inevitably move was based on a claim to know, and to know in a unique sense, what it was” (94). But as both Bernard Shaw and George Orwell made painfully clear, socialism had misapprehended not only the state and temperament of the European worker, and in particular the British laborer, but the best means for securing a lasting, democratic reform of formerly capitalistic societies. They both intrinsically understood, in a way that other socialists could or would not comprehend, that “the poor … are seldom ‘Left’ in any familiar 1930s sense” (Watson 98).

Thus, Orwell in particular, “by constantly raising embarrassing questions about socialist assumptions” tried to “force the movement to scrutinize itself in order to determine whether it was built on reality or fantasy” (Zwerdling 15). The effect of his probing intellect into the least viable corners of Marxist socialism remains both profound and stridently controversial, particularly for critics on the left wing of modern scholarship. Yet tangling with the upper echelon of leftist theorists or brutal communist regimes failed to deter or derail Orwell’s drive to thwart the forward progress of totalitarian communism in the 20th century. Orwell was willing to risk the critical snares of inhabiting the savage, undefined political territory outside the fold of traditional Marxist socialism in order to maintain the integrity of his political voice and literary genius. For the liberty to speak his own mind, irrespective of any offense or discomfort it
might cause to the powers that be, was arguably the lifeblood of Orwell’s distinctive
talent and his political acumen.
Works Cited


CHAPTER III
MARXIST COLLECTIVISM AND THE LITERARY AESTHETIC

“You can’t go into the subject of art anywhere without being brought right up against the theory of socialism .... You will find socialism the basis of art.”

Jack London

If Jack London’s dictum about the inextricable marriage of socialism as a theory and the aesthetics of art is to be taken as accurate, (and due to the brevity of his comments in this interview it is quite unfortunately difficult to ascertain whether he is describing a 20th century phenomenon, or something traceable to Marx himself) one must confront a few essential questions about the contributions of George Bernard Shaw and George Orwell, both famed and classified primarily as literary figures, to the 20th century evolution of socialist thought. Both have been subjected to considerable skepticism by political critics; maligned by fellow leftists for their off-kilter treatments of socialism; at times even ostracized from prominent socialist circles or movements. Shaw found himself at odds with the powerful and well-mobilized Social Democratic Federation, which held the helm of socialist reform in Britain in his day. And I have already detailed a recent leftist critical attempt to warp and marginalize Orwell’s political perspective, from a Marxist theoretical standpoint.

6 “Fifteen Minutes on Socialism with Jack London,” p. 68
What is clear is that the repudiations of Shaw and Orwell seem to stem from the same root: an antipathy toward these two writers’ pronounced habit of breaking with the prevailing current of socialist policy, prejudice or thought in their respective political milieus. Leftist treatments of George Orwell’s writings in particular are frequently laden with resentful, vituperative allegations that strike at his core loyalty and conformity to what these critics deem an authentic socialism. In a similar vein, Shaw has frequently been castigated for his alleged hypocrisy as a wealthy, elite artist rhetorically toying with a scheme of middle class-mounted political revolution.

If, then, we are to accept London’s postulation that socialism and literary art share a profound, even inevitable connection—and surely Orwell and Shaw’s literary fixation on socialism, if nothing else, bear out this claim in part—what is the modern critic to make of the residual antipathy often perceived from socialist scholars toward Shaw and Orwell’s weighty, but certainly not wholly antagonistic, criticisms of Marxist socialism? The answer, I believe, requires a broader analysis of the ideological framework underpinning the literary ethos of the two writers.

In the previous chapters I have established a few assumptions vital to arguing a broader thesis encompassing literature and politics, and utilizing the experiences and contributions of Shaw and Orwell as my principal evidence. First, we have seen that a survey of Shaw and Orwell’s political non-fiction writing establishes, regardless of the myriad critical spins that obscure the original thrust of these writers’ work, not only a vital sympathy with socialist theory and aims, but a fervid and active desire to prune socialism of its less tenable propositions—chiefly those contributed by Marx. Additionally, by virtue of adding their aesthetic contributions to the mix, both writers
strove to draw out socialism’s democratic flavor. Shaw and Orwell each pressed their
distinct talents into the service of socialist ideals, but it is crucial to understand that for
both writers, the socialist ideal and ethic were innately and unequivocally democratic at
the core. Accordingly, the viability of socialism as a definitively democratic theory and
political structure was not for either of these writers an ancillary consideration in view of
the rapidly shifting political landscape of the 20th century. Given the precipitous rise of
fascist and totalitarian modulations of socialist theory in continental and eastern Europe,
the patently democratic impetus for socialism at the nucleus of both Shaw and Orwell’s
political passions served not only to distinguish their views from many of their socialist
peers, but also, and more importantly, informed their moral and rational metrics for
evaluating both the credibility and efficacy of contemporary socialist views.

However, in the previous chapters I have also extensively documented a
considerable and in some ways lingering resistance to Shaw’s and Orwell’s aims to refine
socialist theory, that is, to freely poke and prod at certain facets of the theory in their
speeches, essays, dramas and novels. Moreover, given that neither writer attained nor
wielded real political stature, in the way of holding conspicuous political office or
enjoying widespread popularity within the broader socialist movement in Europe during
his career, how can one account for the nevertheless striking volume and vociferous
character of reactionary socialist criticism, past and present, to Shaw and Orwell’s
political writings? In what remains of this analysis of Shaw and Orwell, I posit an
answer to this quandary by assessing the unique relationship of the collectivism of
Marxist socialistic thought to the individualist literary aesthetic of the two writers in
question.
The clash between socialism and literary ideals can best be assessed and evaluated as part and parcel of a broader and more familiar tension regarding the freedom of speech and literary expression in a strictly political context. Shaw, despite the lavish literary acclaim he was awarded in his later career, nevertheless confessed a persistent anxiety that some political forces were exerting pressure to silence him on the matter of socialism. In a speech to his colleagues within the Parliamentary Labor Party in 1926—an address which, notably, the government forbade the party to publicly air, fearing the broadcasting of partisan remarks from Shaw—Shaw scolded the British government for their moves to censor him and their concomitant insinuations that he remain silent on political matters. Shaw keenly objected that the powers that be “were apparently unaware of the fact that they were insulting me by proposing that I should do a thing which no Englishman can do without betraying his country” (“Speech” 149). For Shaw, pure and effective politics required unbridled access to freedom of speech and political ideas—even the messy, inconvenient criticisms that threaten the theoretical or cultural status quo that lends solidarity and stability to a political movement.

It is perhaps axiomatic—then, as now—to say that the survival of democracy hinges on the preservation and even the collective veneration of free speech. However, forces within politically socialist movements, as Orwell also noted, often heavily qualified or even abjured their espousal of freedom of expression, written or otherwise, in the name of revolutionary expediency. This censorious attitude toward any literary expression with the looming potential of disrupting political solidarity drew a great deal of rhetorical fire from Orwell, particularly in Nineteen Eighty-Four, a work highly illustrative of totalitarian savagery against citizens’ democratic prerogative to exercise
free speech rights. Over the last several decades, some have tried to blunt the edge of Orwell’s trenchant attacks on communist tactics abridging free speech in Nineteen Eighty-Four. And undoubtedly, it would seem more rational (and critically evenhanded) to critique this work on the assumption that Orwell was simply depicting a “worst case scenario,” the most extreme and most egregious of totalitarian possibilities, rather than describing the current political zeitgeist of European socialism or forecasting the future of actual communist states in the mid-20th century.

However, a fair reading of Orwell’s more explicit essays on the posture of socialist governments and theorists toward freedom of speech in his day cannot be squared with this claim. Orwell enumerates the hazards to democratic progress when a government or political party sets clamps down on the vital freedom of literary expression in his 1946 essay “The Prevention of Literature.” Here, Orwell contends that the most important and dangerous of socialist propositions floating around is the view “that freedom is undesirable and that intellectual honesty is a form of antisocial selfishness” (61). Orwell feared that the stark urgency of accomplishing socialist aims swiftly and irrevocably would force the revolution’s purveyors to impinge on the fundamental democratic value of freedom of expression, even among its movement’s own loyal base. For Orwell, freedom of literary expression, like all liberties appertaining to public speech, was an essential right, and one that, however inconvenient or obstructive at times to conducting a social revolution, preserves essential democracy.

Orwell proceeds in the latter portion of the essay to detail several actual tactics employed by totalitarian governments in the service of this very objective, many of which are eerily congruent with the severe and absolute tactics to control citizens’ thoughts depicted in
Nineteen Eighty-Four. A synopsis of Orwell’s objections to these measures has been provided more fully in the previous chapter.7

Among Orwell’s greatest objections to the abridgement of free speech, however, was the concern that when literary artists forfeit the responsibility and endeavor to speak the truth—insofar as one literary mind can apprehend or relate the truth of a given proposition or circumstance—writing loses not only its relevance, but an essential aesthetic power as well. In “The Prevention of Literature,” Orwell makes the case that in consequence of government efforts to erode the value placed on free literary expression, the intrinsic value of open intellectual discourse and inquiry had been severely cheapened, as well as practically hampered, among intelligent socialists. He remarks, ominously, that “on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all” (“Prevention” 64). For in Orwell’s view, “the imaginative writer is unfree when he has to falsify his subjective feelings, which from his point of view are facts . . . . If he is forced to do so, the only result is that his creative faculties dry up” (“Prevention” 65). What is at stake, Orwell suggests, if socialists persist in suppressing literary voices that oppose the movement’s tactics or shed doubt on its theoretical integrity (as both Shaw and Orwell intrepidly chose to do), is the impending abolition of individual and sincere literary expression altogether.

Furthermore, Orwell maintains that the dissent arising within disparate renditions and characterizations of political ideas in literature, while irksome or inconvenient to avid
agents of brisk and absolute socialistic reform, is nevertheless unavoidable, and, one could also argue, democratically healthy. Faced with a collectivist approach to political revolution that espouses the muzzling of individual voices in the name of advancing the wider movement, Bernard Shaw would, I think, echo Orwell’s sentiments and second his objections to this draconian and undemocratic measure. Shaw might acknowledge that there is a steep and practical cost to one’s policy objectives in promoting the freedom of critical expression, especially in tolerating the open voicing of dissenting opinions. However, his own scuffles with political censors taught him in the unequivocal language of experience that the prohibition or suppression of dissenting voices might ultimately retard society’s progress toward socialist aims or even endanger the fragile solidarity of socialist parties.

Again, this possibility is something which Shaw, as an unflinching critic and occasional target of the socialist far left, would certainly acknowledge is a relevant and probable outcome of exercising and endorsing literary freedom. Nevertheless, Shaw, like Orwell, pointed out in his essay “Socialism for Millionaires” that preserving this long-standing and fundamental value of intellectual (and, we can presume, literary) freedom was essential to democracy and worth the expense to socialism. “Our whole theory of freedom of speech and opinion for all citizens, rests,” he explained, “not on the assumption that everybody is right, but on the certainty that everybody is wrong on some point on which somebody else is right, so that there is a public danger in allowing anybody to go unheard” (“Millionaires” 100). To censor or exclude one political or literary voice, no matter how exasperating or inconvenient its claims to the other parties participating in the ongoing political dialogue, compromises the essential integrity of the
broader political debate. It is not advantageous to any sound political or social movement to artificially squelch divergent opinions in the name of collectivism (or the collective “peace” and “prosperity” of a society, as conceived by Marxists)—even when the suppression of speech might eliminate potential conflicts or the splintering of a movement into competing factions. In Shaw and Orwell’s view, silencing individual voices effectively handicaps the collective progress of any society.

In fact, there is more to this assertion, from a critical standpoint, than Bernard Shaw or George Orwell might have ever realized. Firstly, the literary aesthetic, as Orwell’s previous comments indicate, is nearly indistinguishable from the individualist ethos common to great writers generally. A writer committed to excellence in his craft must always resist the urge to regurgitate another’s thoughts or to bend his own voice and expression to the tide of public or political opinion if he endeavors to produce literature not only suffused with a certain measure of artistic integrity, but also bearing distinct value to the advancement and edification of humankind in his era. Henry David Thoreau defended this idea overtly and forcefully in his politically-charged and now widely read 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience”—perhaps one of the most effective political treatises belonging to the Western literary canon of the last 200 years.

Similarly, Bernard Shaw, like Orwell, warned that the attenuation of individual expression favored by many ardent socialist in his day dangerously undermined the fundamental integrity of democratic progress. In fact, observations embedded in Shaw’s 1923 play *Saint Joan* reverberate with George Orwell’s aforementioned sense that a dynamic inherent to individualism is not only vital to the literary aesthetic but also
preferable to Marxist collectivism and political expediency as the real cornerstone for social progress.

Shavian scholars have long acknowledged a puzzling but conspicuous irony in Shaw’s admiration for Joan of Arc exhibited in his eponymous 1923 production about her travails and ultimate execution as leader of a meagerly cobbled together French resistance to the occupying English military in the 15th century. Joan of Arc, known chiefly as a religious idealist and vociferous nationalist—two strikes against Bernard Shaw’s agnostic, socialistic ideology—nevertheless receives not only sympathetic, but even laudatory treatment in Shaw’s play. Shaw drapes his female lead with a rosy, almost effervescent idealism and a disarming simplicity that confounds her political enemies and quickly evokes the audience’s admiration. While Shaw details Joan’s dubious prosecution as a heretic in the last scene of the play proper, the drama closes with a fantastical epilogue involving an anachronistically modern character who serves to justify Joan to her accusers, supernaturally assembled in one room for a dream sequence, and to accentuate in almost obsequious terms her subsequent canonization and courageous legacy in the annals of European history.

Shaw’s adulation for Joan of Arc—a servant of irrational religious impulses and by no means a political pragmatist—is not entirely inexplicable, however, given the previous observation about the markedly individualist pulse of the literary aesthetic. Joan in many respects constitutes a perfect foil to Shaw’s other iconoclastic protagonist, Andrew Undershaft of *Major Barbara*, whose opportunistic pursuits of unmitigated power and abundant capital are surpassed in intensity only by his arrant disgust for conventional religion. Yet both characters resonate with Bernard Shaw the writer in one
definitive respect—their stark, unflinching individualism and resistance to socio-political conformity. Both Joan and Undershaft exude an enthralling and almost preternatural charisma, and perhaps more importantly, both labor undeterred to cut through the confusion of knotty political or religious dispute to achieve the objectives that inspired their own convictions about life. Though both characters’ passions and convictions prove highly divergent when contextualized within their respective stories, the dissimilarity of Joan’s and Undershaft’s aims does not in any way negate what Shaw hopes to exemplify through each figure—the inspirational qualities and exceptional efficacy of defiant individualism.

As Major Barbara’s perplexing protagonist has already been parsed in a prior chapter, let us turn our attention more exclusively to the case of Saint Joan. First, consider the contextual background for Shaw’s dramatic rendering of Joan of Arc. Shaw’s play is rife with disorienting conflations of religious and political ideals, jumbled and diluted by each of the drama’s flimsy characters. Most of the play’s motley cast come off as unquestioningly self-absorbed and opportunistic, from the skeptical Archbishop of Rheims to the craven King Charles and the unscrupulous Earl of Warwick. Whenever Joan of Arc enters the stage, however, her singular and unvarnished devotion to personal ideals and convictions illuminates their muddled motives like the sun through a receding fog, and her undaunted courage dwarfs their petty concerns about the constant jockeying for religious or political supremacy or the preservation of a tenuous social status quo.

Joan’s remarkable resilience and cocksure attitude has a particularly nettlesome effect on certain characters. In scene 1, Captain Robert de Baudricourt becomes the first
of many characters in the play to defy Joan’s impetuous conviction respecting God’s wish to establish and defend the borders and culture of France. Baudricourt dismisses Joan’s radically nationalistic views and her advocacy for immediate action to expel the English as impractical and out-of-touch, especially in view of the well-entrenched feudalistic and religiously parochial loyalties that have prevailed in the minds of European commoners for an epoch. To his thorough objections Joan simply responds, “We are all subject to the King of Heaven . . . . You must not think about your duty to your feudal lord, but about your duty to God” (69). Throughout parallel conversations with other characters in the drama, Joan consistently reiterates her conviction that man is duty-bound to God over and against the dictates of the church or a particular political figure, or the convenience of a prevailing social status quo. Considerations of historical precedent and conventional wisdom never enter the picture for Joan—she is a woman devoted to a clear, simple and defiantly intuitive vision, and her fervor for change is constructed upon very basic, implacable loyalties not only to God, but to God’s work through her as His special and individual vessel.

In scene iv, an irate Bishop Monseigneur Cauchon expresses his disgust at Joan’s persistence in adhering to individual vision over and against the collective wisdom and long-standing authority of the established church. “The Pope himself at his proudest dare not presume as this woman presumes,” he fumes. “She acts as if she herself were The Church . . . . Has she ever in all her utterances said one word of The Church? Never. It is always God and herself” (103). Nevertheless, Joan is ultimately more effective and inspirational as an agent of progress, and a more venerable object of adoration and emulation by the French proletariat, than any of the simpering band of political and
religious charlatans swarming Charles’s throne. Later, an enlightening tirade from Cauchon on the matter of “heresy,” in which he defines the crime as that which “sets up the private judgment of a single erring mortal against the considered wisdom and experience of the Church” further lends credence to the contention that Joan’s greatest transgression in the eyes of her myriad of detractors is her stubbornly individualistic ethos, especially since Joan consistently and ingenuously endorses, honors and pledges loyalty to the Church proper throughout the play (130).

Most assuredly, Shaw did not share a literal belief in Joan’s nationalistic doctrines nor the veracity of her saintly “voices,” but he is clearly enraptured with her singularity as a woman of focus and passion among a slough of characters preoccupied with political expediency, the pursuit of titles, military appeasement or the tenuous lure of social advancement. Joan’s distinct fealty to not only a counter-intuitive vision of French independence but also to a richly individualistic outlook emerges unequivocally in a conversation in scene iii between her and military commander Dunois. In this spirited exchange, Dunois aims to deter Joan from launching a military attack, given the infeasibility of assaulting an English stronghold without clear tactical advantage. Convinced that God has already ordained that Joan reclaim several forts from the English situated within formerly French territories, Joan issues the following protest:

JOAN: They cannot hold them against God. God did not give them the land under those forts: they stole it from Him. He gave it to us. I will take those forts.

DUNOIS: Single-handed?

JOAN: Our men will take them. I will lead them.

DUNOIS: Not a man will follow you.
JOAN: I will not look back to see whether anyone is following me. (91)

Joan’s refusal to be swayed from her individual convictions and objectives, whether by political pressure or religious opposition, ultimately secures her a conviction for heresy from an ecclesiastical kangaroo court and a cruel execution at the hands of the English government. Interestingly, even when the epilogue vindicates Joan before her accusers, most of whom freely repent of their opposition to her and acknowledge the rectitude of her vision and exploits in hindsight, not one of her peers is eager to see her resurrected. The aversion toward individualism—and its threat to political stability, religious authority and social solidarity—continues to haunt the memory of even a canonized Joan of Arc.

Since Shaw’s esteem for Joan of Arc could not stem from her militarism or her religious zeal, two features of Joan’s modus operandi dissonant with Shaw’s outlook on the world, one must deduce that his reverence for Joan springs from the stark and unflinching individualism that envelops both her personality and historical legacy. Shaw likely saw in Joan a quality that resonated not only with the character of Andrew Undershaft, but also with Shaw’s own career as a politically and socially conscious dramatist. Shaw often found himself at odds with the socialist zeitgeist of his time, not because he opposed socialism proper (any more than Joan ever forsook her loyalty to the Roman Catholic church), but for impugning certain strains of thought within the socialist movement that he felt compromised its ultimate democratic integrity and eventual success. Shaw, like Joan, eschewed expediency and political demagoguery in order to achieve a socialism built on individual vision and intellect, one enshrined in his literary contributions to the political matters at the heart of social revolution. Like Joan, Shaw
tampered with the socialist status quo, and reaped opposition for asserting his distinct and meddling voice into the political cacophony of his tumultuous era in European history. He was a “heretic,” in the mold of Joan of Arc, for opposing the rapidly cementing doctrines of worker revolution that Marx had built into the foundations of 19th century socialist theory.

It is perhaps in view of the inflexibility of socialists respecting the practical application of their theoretical blueprint for social renovation that George Watson calls socialism “a scriptural doctrine” (10). Watson incisively points out that “theories of politics, even more quickly than religious dogmas, can ossify into positions held and proclaimed by groups, parties and interests [that] can rapidly entrench into slogans that represent institutions, mass parties and ruling elites. Giving them up can mean giving up the certitudes of a lifetime and everything that follows from those certitudes, which can include acquaintances and friends” (14). Shaw and Orwell discovered that by subjecting “scripturally” revered tenets of socialism to scrutiny under the lenses of drama, fiction and honest discursive analysis, their credentials as socialists were questioned and occasionally besmirched by fellow leftists. Nevertheless, they stood their ground against a host of formidable, outspoken critics and the frequent application of social pressure against their efforts to air substantive grievances. These writers’ undaunted persistence in the face of unfriendly reactions of this sort owes, as I have previously argued, to their stalwart commitment to aesthetic and intellectual integrity over and above the political expediency of establishing and perpetuating socialism at all costs.

Though the individualist strain is arguably less dominant in Orwell’s fiction, the essay “Shooting an Elephant” reverberates with a similarly stark tension between
individual convictions and collective coercion. Orwell recounts in this anecdote how as a young imperial officer in Burma he bowed to an invisible pressure to shoot an elephant that had broken loose and terrorized a Burmese village, but whose “must” (or hormonal madness) had worn off by the time he arrived at the scene where the massive beast was obliviously and innocuously grazing in a field. Orwell riddled the animal with bullets, well aware of the social and financial cost of killing a healthy and presently harmless elephant, a vital component of commercial labor as well as the private property to a citizen of Burma. More significantly, Orwell does so in order to save face as a British officer entrenched in a colonial conundrum by which he must please the native onlookers, who eagerly await the sport and the meat supplied by killing the elephant. In doing so he compromises his intuition that the elephant’s killing is unwarranted and an inappropriate course of action, one actually committed in the service of maintaining an enforced political pretense that the British wield real and incontrovertible power over their colonized territories. Orwell describes the officer’s sensations and hasty deliberation before shooting the elephant in these terms:

The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. (95)

Orwell illustrates powerfully the dangers of collectivism, and particularly the conforming pressures of an odiously militant collectivism, as it engulfs the moral convictions and intuitive judgment of even a British officer in Burma. Orwell’s own identity and
personal prerogative are swallowed up in the expediency of enforcing political and social pretexts respecting his identity as part of the British Raj. Unlike Joan of Arc, the officer caves to largely illusory pressures and slinks away from an opportunity to exercise his individual identity in the face of a collectively-enforced brand of social compulsion and political necessity. Shooting the elephant is a lapse in individual judgment which, in a vivid form of literary retrospection, Orwell keenly laments to the same degree that Shaw eulogizes Joan’s risky but effectual resilience in devoting herself to an individual vision that drew the reactionary and violent ire of her peers.

One can detect a similar current of suppressed but courageously defiant individualism kicking against the goads of a tyrannical collectivism in the world of Orwell’s dystopic novel Nineteen Eighty-Four. Throughout the narrative, readers viscerally latch on to the slender hope that Winston Smith can breach the control of Oceania’s intrusively tyrannical state and attain something like an individual identity, amid a coldly and cruelly enforced conformity that unrelentingly robs Oceania’s citizens of any right to privacy or free expression. Obviously, that hope of carving out a space for free expression shrivels up for Winston Smith as well as Orwell’s democratically sympathetic readers by the end of the story.

However, Orwell’s contradistinction of literature and literary symbols to the oppressive regime and social construct of Oceania is of crucial significance to our present analysis. In the first chapter of Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston’s ruminations on the violence and repression of the ruling party in Oceania impel him to risk death (by exposure via “telescreen” to the Thought Police) in order to surreptitiously inscribe resentful sentiments into a diary he purchased in a poor quarter of London. Orwell
depicts Winston’s anxiety respecting the actual benefits of trying to breach complete and irrevocable tyranny by token of this private literary exercise:

For the first time the magnitude of what he had undertaken came home to him. How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present, in which case it would not listen to him, or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless. (9)

If Winston writes not for posterity, one must conclude that the act of writing in this context serves a present, primarily existential and individual purpose. Writing has no utility for the forlorn and frustrated protagonist outside of enforcing and even constituting individuality in an almost pathetically banal form. Nonetheless, Winston’s writing in the diary is richly significant to the novel, given the unique social texture of the fictional world in which Winston Smith lives. The weight of this moment and of this act in the novel—the act of capturing individual concerns or presentiments on paper—cannot be understated, given the almost hyperactive censorship and thought control inherent to Winston’s environs. Pen in hand and diary open, Winston is both enraptured and petrified in the action of scribbling down his thoughts. For Winston, this species of simple, honest literary activity transcends expression in the common sense and becomes the chief mode for giving expression to his individuality. Scrawling his thoughts in the diary allows him to exercise a furtive but symbolically powerful rebellion against the constrictive identity espoused and enforced upon him by the Oceanic state.

In fact, the role, purpose and risk of literature in the dystopic world of Oceania becomes a matter of crucial interest in the novel. Early in the story, Winston recounts that the opposition movement of Oceania, routinely made an object of state-enforced
derision and suspicion, has coalesced around a book authored by Emmanuel Goldstein and which, curiously, has no title. Orwell’s description is helpful here:

There were also whispered stories of a terrible book, a compendium of all the heresies, of which Goldstein was the author and which circulated clandestinely here and there. It was a book without a title. People referred to it, if at all, simply as the book. But one knew of such things only through vague rumors. (15)

Whether or not this “book” actually exists is of negligible difference to the outcome of the story. What matters more to the central premise of Orwell’s novel as well as to our current analysis are the government’s acute concerns about the threat posed by this work of literature, a menace perhaps inherent to all literature unsanctioned by the state. Here, the lack of a given title to Goldstein’s work and the ominous gravity of Orwell’s description of “the book” may suggest that this piece of literature represents a wider body of individual literary expression (even in the abstract) that threatens the perpetual solidarity and control that lends such inexorable power to the state government of Oceania. The obscurity enveloping “the book” makes it nearly euphemistic, a title encompassing the threat of dissident voices inevitable when literary expression is permitted by the state.

Furthermore, a stark and useful contrast between “collectivist” and “individualist” literature complicates the theme of literary expression within totalitarian society from the very outset of Orwell’s novel. It is no accident, for example, that the story’s protagonist works for the Ministry of Truth, a state department which expends considerable man and machine power to rewrite the past through careful editing of archived public documents. However, as Winston also indicates in the second chapter, the Ministry of Truth’s “primary job was not to reconstruct the past but to supply the citizens of Oceania with
newspapers, films, textbooks, telescreen programs, plays, novels—with every conceivable kind of information, instruction, or entertainment, from a statue to a slogan, from a lyric poem to a biological treatise, and from a child’s spelling book to a Newspeak dictionary” (43-44). Therefore, the state government of Oceania has not outlawed literature of all sorts; literature, for one thing, is too convenient as a handy mode of propaganda or perhaps as a Marxian opiate for the proles in Oceania.

However, Orwell makes it clear that the use of pen and ink by individual citizens has become relatively obsolete in Oceania, apparently because it represents a threat to established government if any writing is done for personal, rather than state-prescribed, reasons. The distinction is crucial, as one can discern from the outlandishly inconsistent positions of Oceania’s government toward public and private literature, that in Oceania the dissemination of collectivist literature, shaped and sanitized by the state, poses no threat to the totalitarian stranglehold of the ruling party. Yet, on the other hand, Winston’s clumsy journaling of his own reflections in a private diary imperils his future, as it somehow represents a bold threat to the Oceanic state. The inference from this contrast of state-spun individual literature to private expression in writing is both manifest and critically important to our study of individualism within socialist thought. For we can conclude that in the world of Oceania, as in the thematic framework of Nineteen Eighty-Four, literature as free and individual expression, and only when conceived as and pressed into service of points of view, remains diametrically opposed and inestimably threatening to the collectively-enforced identity of the ruling party in the novel. Consequently, anyone like Winston Smith who dares question the social and political status quo of Oceania is, much like Joan of Arc in Shaw’s rendering of 14th
century Europe, subject to accusations of a political heresy and the concomitant threat of brutal execution.

Orwell, too, felt the nascent pressures of an overbearing socialist collectivism picking up steam across the masses of Europe, and of its advocates breathing down his neck in the 1940s. The proponents of more stringent controls on literary expression, even for socialist comrades, hazarded for George Orwell the promise of a Europe in which individual voices, preserved and exercised in a literature guided not by the state but by disparate voices with disparate perspectives, could all freely contribute to a shared democracy. Thus, he pictorialized in Nineteen Eighty-Four the desperate and deplorable condition of a state for whom measures to silence individual expression, prerogative and identity for the sake of the collective objectives of political expediency and efficiency have finally matured into a sanitized insanity. In Oceania, the individual, along with any vestiges of exceptional literature sprouting from the fertile soil of individualism, have been trampled under the heavy step of state-enforced collectivism.

So we see that Shaw and Orwell’s criticisms of Marxism were not strictly motivated by theoretical qualms, political biases or nuanced disagreements with Marxists on the finer points of socialism. The source of their occasional aversion to 20th century socialism appears to be rooted in a more widely encompassing philosophical and aesthetic issue. A “public danger” lurked beneath the political censure of literary expression, especially when the writing in question—whether intentionally or incidentally—undermined the solidarity or efficiency of the political movement it opposed. To censure literature is to undermine democratic process—for the democratic process, Orwell and Shaw seem to argue, depends on the contributions of honest,
unimpeded literary minds, even when the resulting literature skews political in terms of its prominent themes, cultural relevance and practical ramifications.

For the literary aesthetic is as emphatically and essentially individualistic as Marxist socialism proved largely collectivist in its aims and tactics during the course of the 20th century. Consequently, the literary geniuses of both George Bernard Shaw and George Orwell, while fundamentally socialist in principle, aim and ethos, nevertheless reflexively recoiled at any suggestion by their socialist peers that the suppression of individual expression of a dissenting nature might rightly serve a collective cause outweighing the democratic prerogative of unbridled speech. To Shaw and Orwell, a concession on this point would have negated not only the basic merits of democracy, with its distinctive and essential rights to free speech, but would have also doused and perhaps extinguished the literary aesthetic—as essentially individualistic as socialism, they believed, was essentially democratic—that fueled both their political zealousness and their artistic inspiration.

In conclusion, then, both Shaw and Orwell were impelled to exercise their prerogative to criticize socialist theory on the basis of not only passionate political convictions, but also, and perhaps more justifiably, for the sake of honoring the self-preservational and democratically vital literary sensibilities that undergirded their individualistic brand of politically-oriented writing. Orwell makes it clear that he saw little distinction between his robust political passion and the literary impulse to tackle political issues in his fiction. In “The Prevention of Literature,” he notes, “There is no such thing as genuinely non-political literature, and least of all in an age like our own, when fears, hatreds, and loyalties of a directly political kind are near to the surface of
everyone’s consciousness” (65). On this point, Orwell sides with the socialist American author Jack London, who confessed that he had reached a similar conclusion about the impossibility of extirpating the social democrat’s conviction regarding the necessity for economic and political justice from an even deeper artistic impulse for truth-telling in literary form.

Notwithstanding their patently socialist predilection as intellectuals and artists, the categorically literary postulations of Shaw and Orwell upon socialist matters, rooted not in a strictly defined view of socialist theory, but engendered from aesthetic sensibilities and unmitigated observations of basic human experience, could not be tolerated by many avid socialists. The forthright critiques of socialism offered by these writers threatened the essential integrity and efficacy of the political scheme and organized movements arising from the theory. And for this precise reason, Shaw and Orwell, who each tendered several sensible and forcefully argued objections to the socialist status quo of their respective milieus, had to withstand political and critical heat from socialists ideologically loyal to a Marxist iteration of socialism built without doubt on some significant and revolutionary insights, but also fraught with several equally dangerous blind spots and inconsistencies.

In a brief essay on George Bernard Shaw, written in 1943, George Orwell remarked of his literary predecessor and socialist compatriot, “If you examine Shaw’s . . . plays, you find that some of them . . . don’t have the same freshness today, because in them he is attacking illusions which no one any longer believes in” (“Bernard Shaw” 119). Though this comment might at first glance appear derogatory of Shaw’s relevance as a thinker and dramatist, Orwell clarifies his comment shortly thereafter by
characterizing Shaw as a “debunking writer,” and noting that “the self-satisfied, prudish, money-ruled world that Shaw made fun of has been washed away by the spread of scepticism (sic) and enlightenment; and for that scepticism and enlightenment Shaw himself, as much as any one writer of our time, is responsible” (“Bernard Shaw” 120,121). Orwell conjectures that Shaw’s incisiveness and effectiveness as a social critic might have rendered his own satire obsolete. It might also, coincidently, predispose modern academics to underestimate the risks and personal costs borne by Shaw, as well as Orwell, in asserting their literary genius on behalf of the survival and advancement of social democracy.

Furthermore, as Jack London’s aforementioned observation denotes, essential socialism is about the human struggle, and justly rendering the human struggle is most certainly the basis of lasting and relevant art. Literature and political theory, therefore, are strange but necessary bedfellows. It is no surprise, then, that Shaw and Orwell both keenly felt a burden to press their literary genius into the service of socialism, nor that bureaucrats and revolutionary idealists holding the reigns of the socialist movement have often recoiled at their trenchant, but substantial criticisms of socialist theory. Nevertheless, this unrelieved, and perhaps unavoidable, tension between the individualist literary aesthetic and the expediency of political action and ideological loyalty to Marxist collectivism will likely persist.

Yet the literary impulse and aesthetic—as well as the desire to exercise it freely regardless of the political consequences of breaking rank with fellow socialists—eclipsed both writers’ allegiances to what is perhaps the most formidable political theory of the last century. As George Orwell once remarked in his characteristically keen but jaunty
style, “At present we know only that the imagination, like certain wild animals, will not 
breed in captivity” (“Prevention” 71-72). Perhaps the captivity of collectivism remains 
the great stain of socialism on the 20th century, and the wildness of literary individualism 
the great legacy of George Bernard Shaw and George Orwell.
Works Cited


