George Orwell: The anatomy of fanaticism and hatred

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Leonidas Donskis considers George Orwell's collected writings on nationalism as a root for ideological and political fanaticism. Upon the basis of these arguments, Donskis proposes that a form of liberal, reflexive nationalism can serve to actually critically question our own country and culture.

Madness is something rare in individuals – but in groups, parties, peoples, ages it is the rule.
Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

George Orwell (1903-1950) played a decisive role in the struggle against totalitarian consciousness and organized hatred. It was through his satires, dystopias, and political essays that the literature of lonely humanists and skeptical liberals became the battleground where the cynical nature of violent politics and organized hatred of the twentieth century was revealed in a thrilling way. He not only exposed totalitarianism and ideocratic hatred, inherent in the age of the making and unmaking of enemies, but also uncovered the trajectories of modern consciousness and imagination that were characteristic of Western societies and were deeply symptomatic of the fabrication of political and ideological adversaries. Orwell’s name may well be said to have become the banner raised by those who believed in the valid uniqueness of human life, individual reason, and individual conscience.

The quest for enemies and the invention of adversaries may be said to have been Orwell’s major themes that permeated his fiction and political essays. He penetrated the politics of organized hatred that resulted from the phantoms and forgeries of the modern troubled imagination as nobody else in modern literature and philosophy. If Central and Eastern Europe may well be said to have become a litmus test case in world history concerning the intensity and lunacy of modern political and ideological hatred, then Orwell can certainly qualify for the title of the honorary Central- and Eastern European. 1984 still stands as an unsurpassed and astonishing example of the powers of social analysis and moral reflexivity that modern literature can possess. Animal Farm appears as the first social satire to have caught the tragicomic inadequacy between the initial-
idealistic and romantic phase of revolution and subsequent totalitarian practices inexorably following from the nature of revolution, rather than from the distortions of a worthy theory.

Yet it is Orwell’s thoughtful essay, “Notes on Nationalism,” rather than his remarkable dystopias, that gives us a clue to the origins of ideological and political fanaticism. Not having found a better word to describe this disturbing phenomenon of the twentieth century, Orwell employs “nationalism,” which clearly means here something different from what the scholars of nationalism, equipped with conventional academic wisdom, would have discussing it.

By “nationalism” I mean first of all the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects and that whole blocks of millions or tens of millions of people can be confidently labelled “good” or “bad.” But secondly – and this much more important – I mean the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognizing no other duty than that of advancing its interests. Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. Both words are normally used in so vague a way that any definition is liable to be challenged, but one must draw a distinction between them, since two different and even opposing ideas are involved. By “patriotism” I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people. Patriotism is by nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.

[1]

In fact, nationalism can easily be defended against Orwell’s devastating criticism. For instance, it might be suggested that what he describes as a propensity to place one’s object of devotion and affection beyond good and evil and to recognize no other duty than that of advancing its interests concerns conservative and radical nationalism, rather than a liberal one. Even more, nationalism could be advocated by reminding us of the myriad ways it manifests itself. Liberal nationalism, which obviously was the initial phase of nationalism in the first half of the nineteenth century, could be taken as just another term for liberalism itself. Herder’s idea that every culture is a kind of self-asserting, self-sufficient, unique, and irreplaceable collective individual cannot be conceived of otherwise than another version – German or Central European – of liberalism.

Liberal nationalism has always been, and continues to be, an interpretive and normative framework for the critical questioning of one’s society and culture, rather than a deaf and blind glorification of one’s history and culture. As a social and moral philosophy, liberal nationalism established an important pattern of intellectual culture, whose essence lies in the modernizing critique of society and culture. Moreover, liberalism and democratic nationalism sustains our modern intellectual and grounded moral sensibilities. It is ironic that by lightly discarding nationalism as a whole, Orwell dismisses what was his own substantial contribution to the modern democratic world, namely, the struggle against
totalitarianism. Yet he had not seen this sort of nationalism, whose merits in the struggle against totalitarianism were to mark the history of twentieth century Central and Eastern Europe. [2]

Regrettably, in the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalism in Europe was increasingly becoming defensive, mass-oriented, ideological, and doctrinal. It seems to have been so partly because of the impact of Social Darwinism, and also because of some strong antimodernist reactions, which capitalized on the idea of the defense of the nation from external and internal enemies alike. In many cases, nationalism, in fact, became primitive and “zoological.” However this has not always been so. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Europe was full of liberal nationalists who maintained the ideas of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, human fellowship, moral reciprocity, commitment, and sympathetic understanding, and who firmly believed that the fight for independence and freedom of any country was a common cause. The epoch of the springtime of the peoples, as well as Herder’s noble-spirited and generous philosophy of culture, is simply out of touch with what we can depict as blood-and-soil, ethnic cleansing brand of nationalism. If we are not to conflate National Socialism, as a global racist ideology and as a blueprint for a world order, with nationalism, then we have to admit that a widespread propensity to blame all evils of the twentieth century solely on nationalism is really odd, to say the least. The ethic of liberal nationalism was instrumental in discrediting and, consequently, dismantling totalitarianism. In communist countries, even conservative nationalism played an important role, advocating such fundamental forms of human rights and dignity as freedom of speech, conscience, and association, and also freedom to practice one’s religion and culture.

This is not to say, however, that all forms of nationalism are compatible with the ideals of peace and democracy. A kind of para-ideology, nationalism proved adaptable to all principal modern ideologies – namely, conservatism, liberalism, and socialism. It makes nationalism a vague phenomenon of modern politics and culture. As Orwell admits himself, every definition of nationalism is doomed to be incomplete. If so, every definition of nationalism is liable to be challenged. One of the reasons is that “nationalism” cannot in principle function as a kind of abstract and polysemantic term. By making it so, we deprive the term “nationalism” of any sense. It simply makes no sense to disconnect nationalism from an ideological framework within which it comes to define identity, freedom, tradition, power, authority, virtue, and other key phenomena of politics and culture in whose name it speaks up. At the same time, it is an unpardonable mistake to detach nationalism from the concrete political setting in which it operates. In a liberal democracy, nationalism can be integrated into the liberal moral culture and thus accommodated in the pluralist setting. Needless to say, this is not exclusively the case: even in a liberal democracy, nationalism can be adjusted to, or translated into, a set of racist and xenophobic sentiments, antimodernist reactions, or the illiberal systems of moralization, such as the culture of determinism. In undemocratic regimes, nationalism can be translated into any kind of predominant militant rhetoric or symbolic design of political and ideological partisanship. As a frame of reference for blood-and-soil mystique, it can also be incorporated into the general pattern of hatred and paranoia instigated by politically, ideologically, or religiously motivated hate groups, whatever their guise. It is simply pointless, if not to say unfair, to deal with nationalism without clearly defining its ideological framework and political setting.
Neither are things crystal clear with patriotism. If the liberal facet of nationalism implies the critical questioning of one’s society and culture, patriotism, in most cases, is a kind of attachment to, and identification with, a certain country, its territory, history, landscape, language, and symbols of power. This sort of attachment and identification usually is devoid of any critical approach. The principle “my country, right or wrong” may well be said to have always been the quintessence of patriotism. [3]
Whereas a nationalist would criticize sharply any deviation from what he or she assumes as the moral substance of the object of his devotion or her commitment, a patriot would insist that no fact or event could prevent him or her from keeping fidelity to his or her country. Any form of government or political regime, in patriot’s perception, is an inalienable part of his/her country, and as such has to be supported. Loyalty to it is as necessary as opposition to those who too critically judge it or those who do not wish it well, both from within and from without. Therefore, the dividing line between small-scale, timid, and apologetic patriotism on the one hand, and imperial attachment to, and identification, with the territory as a symbol of the crown or of majestic history, i.e., on the other might not be as sharp as Orwell imagined it. Both rest on a vague territorial sentiment and a loosely bound idea of superiority of one’s country over the rest of the world. Both reject a critical perspective in viewing one’s country, which is perceived as an object of pride and of defense against those wishing it ill, rather than as an embodiment of a link between moral imagination and social reality.

However astonishing it may sound, Orwell appears to have applied the ethic of liberal nationalism to his social and cultural critique, rather than to have been just a fair-minded patriot of England, who passionately opposed jingoism and imperial patriotism. The point is that he found himself at odds with the banal and reactionary essence of jingoism precisely because of his liberal nationalism. I realize that I go against the current here. The idea that Orwell was a liberal nationalist may be perceived as a heresy, if not as a characteristically Eastern – Central European obsession with the recent past of Eastern Central Europe or as an imposition of its realities on the rest of the world. Indeed, liberal nationalism, as a moral and political paradigm, has little, if anything at all, to do with British intellectual and political culture. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a more inhospitable and insensitive theoretical setting for the nationalist moral culture than Anglo-American philosophy permeated by nominalism as well as by mistrust for what it takes as Continental idiosyncrasies and wild political theories. This sort of philosophy regards nationalism merely as one more nebulous concept of the notorious holism. It is also true that the former imperial entities, such as Britain, France, Sweden, or Russia, are considerably more leaning to, patronizing politics, and to what they perceive as their civilizing mission than to that powerful ethical dimension of genuine internationalism, which is at the core of liberal nationalism. Hence, a great deal of moral provincialism and insensitivity to small countries and their cultures is inherent in the politics of the former empires. We have a good reason to believe that liberal nationalism, which is by no means irreconcilable with skeptical liberalism, is likely to have originated from the specifically Eastern – Central European political realities and moral sensibilities.

Yet Orwell’s political and moral stance might best be described as a liberal nationalism, which made him so remarkably close and emphatically sensitive to the tragedies of Central and Eastern Europe. The idea that Orwell’s moral stance was much closer to liberal nationalism than to a kind of abstract, ideological, and doctrinal socialism may shed new light on his overall hostility to doctrinaire intellectuals, ideological true
believers, and fanatics of all shades. Here and nowhere else lies the secret of Orwell’s nearly magical appeal to East-Central European intellectual and moral sensibilities. Noteworthy is the fact that it is liberal nationalists who tend to be the harshest critics of the sinister mystique, barbaric vocabulary, and ferocious politics of blood-and-soil nationalism. Recall such great Central and East European critics of illiberal nationalism as Czeslaw Milosz, Adam Michnik, Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, or Tomas Venclova. [4] You do not have to call yourself a “nationalist” to be one.

Nonetheless, nationalism, as well as its derivative phenomena, such as collective identity and collective memory, remained for Orwell a vague category. He regarded nationalism as just another term for moral provincialism, and quite justifiably so as far as conservative or radical nationalism is concerned. Writing his “Notes on Nationalism” in 1945, Orwell could associate nationalism only with the old imperial sentiment, i.e., jingoism, transferred ideological idioms or partisan feelings, and also with some anti-modernist reactions, which he described so aptly. Hence, Orwell’s strong opposition to nationalism as a sui generis phenomenon, and also his temptation to accord to the term an exclusively pejorative connotation. Ascribing to nationalism almost every possible manifestation of group stereotyping, political cleavages, social and ideological divisions, and even chauvinism and racism, Orwell is at risk of losing not only the frame of reference, but also the target of his criticism.

However insightful and brilliant in his sharp and provocative analysis of what he called “transferred nationalism,” i.e., such transferred or transposed forms of exclusive ideology as Communism, political Catholicism, color feeling, and class feeling, Orwell failed to understand and appreciate nationalism as a social criticism. The trouble with his concept of nationalism is that nationalism begins to mean everything and, in effect, nothing. Although Orwell, as Timothy Garton Ash suggested, richly deserved to qualify for the honorable title of one of the great Central and East Europeans, [5] an additional remark is needed here. When depicting totalitarianism or deploring the naïveté and myopia of Western intellectuals concerning their attitude to the most “progressive” part of the world, Orwell reaches the heights of Central and East European intellectual and moral sensibility. Yet on nationalism he writes as a British maverick and dissenter, an enfant terrible of British socialism, who deliberately translates the term into a tool of critique targeted at pre- and postwar British and European political realities.

Yet we could argue that by nationalism Orwell clearly means something else here. Had he spoken about nationalism in the way we see it now, it would have been easy to discard his essay as a superficial writing unable to go to the root of the problem. The point, however, is that Orwell did touch upon the nerve of what we could call a dramatic encounter of debating loyalties and conflicting values. He described with the stroke of genius what we could take as intrinsic conflicts that occur within the troubled moral imagination. For him, “nationalism” was merely a code word for a more disturbing and complex phenomenon. Whatever the term he employed, Orwell gave us an invaluable clue to the origin of modern ideological and political fanaticism as a form of hatred. Although mass movements and their interchangeability, doctrinal and mass-oriented politics, and exclusive ideologies seem more accurate terms to describe the target of Orwell’s smashing critique, his concept of transferred and transposed nationalism provides a valuable perspective to view modern fanaticism. It sheds new light on the modern moral imagination as the battleground of conflicting sets of concepts, values, ideas, stances,
and objects of attachment. At the same time, he stresses the modern uncertainties and ambiguities as a source of fanaticism. Of transferred nationalism and transferable nationalist loyalties Orwell writes:

The intensity with which they are held does not prevent nationalist loyalties from being transferable.... They can be and often are fastened upon some foreign country. One quite commonly finds that great national leaders, or the founders of nationalist movements, do not even belong to the country they have glorified. Sometimes they are outright foreigners, or more often they come from peripheral areas where nationality is doubtful. Examples are Stalin, Hitler, Napoleon, de Valera, Disraeli, Poincaré, Beaverbrook. The Pan-German movement was in part the creation of an Englishman, Houston Chamberlain. For the past fifty or a hundred years, transferred nationalism has been a common phenomenon among literary intellectuals. With Lafcadio Hearne the transference was to Japan, with Carlyle and many others of his time to Germany, and in our own age it is usually Russia. [6]

The implication is that transferred nationalism results from uncertainty of one’s primary identity and object of attachment. We do need an identity and an object of loyalty or attachment. If we are deprived of this or if we are not at peace with what others passionately identify with, we are inexorably doomed to forge their substitutes. In so doing, we are at risk of dangerously improvising or simply fabricating an identity, which has no reference point in this-worldly reality and which extends an invitation to the realm of the troubled imagination. If we are not rooted in this-worldly reality in the sense of being an autonomous individual and of having a solid, resilient, and immutable identity, we will search for a substitute to fill the gap somehow. If we happen to have no attachment to our country or if we are little appreciated in our culture, a kind of dislocation of our human attachment and loyalty will inevitably take place.

The paradox of nationalism, as a thought-and-action system capable of sustaining the modern intellectual and grounded moral sensibilities, lies in the fact that its excess and absence can both end up in disaster. Whereas an excess of nationalism leads to moral provincialism and total insensitivity to those who do not belong to us, its absence results in disconnectedness from all recognizable, down-to-earth idioms of human loyalty and attachment. Nationalism, if it operates in a liberal-democratic setting, does prevent us from ideological and political fanaticism, not to mention myriad travesties of human attachment, loyalty, collective memory, and collective sentiment. After all, our attachment to our culture, language, and landscape is among fundamental human needs. If we lose the primary object of our love and attachment, or if we are deprived of it, we will transfer our loyalty. We will find a new object of attachment elsewhere. It can be another country to which we will attach an alternative, no matter whether real or imaginary-a revolutionary political program or a dissenting religion or a rival civilization or an opposing value-and-idea system. As Orwell points out:

When one sees the slavish or boastful rubbish that is written about Stalin, the Red Army, etc., by fairly intelligent and sensitive people, one realizes that this is only possible because some kind of dislocation has taken place. In societies such as ours, it is unusual for anyone describable as an intellectual to feel a very deep
attachment to his own country. Public opinion – that is, the section of public opinion of which he as an intellectual is aware – will not allow him to do so. Most of the people surrounding him are sceptical and disaffected, and he may adopt the same attitude from imitativeness or sheer cowardice: in that case he will have abandoned the form of nationalism that lies nearest to hand without getting any closer to a genuinely internationalist outlook. He still feels the need for a Fatherland, and it is natural to look for one somewhere abroad. (p.164)

No wonder that transferred nationalism is possible precisely because of the aforementioned instability and intensity of the nationalist’s loyalties. The only thing that remains constant in the nationalist, according to Orwell, is his or her own state of mind. The object of his/her feelings is changeable, and may be imaginary. It also happens that this sort of ideological fervor-nationalism, as Orwell would have it – can be transposed or reversed. Thus, former admirers of the United States of America can turn into the greatest skeptics and critics of that country, reserving their love and admiration for its newly found adversary, if not a rival civilization-namely, Russia. For instance, this happened to H. G. Wells, who moved from Americophilia to Americophobia, the latter coupled with Russophilia. That a number of members of the Nazi Party were recruited from German Communist Party when the Nazis came to power, and that Communists were regarded by the Nazis as far lesser evil than Social Democrats is a fact. This was subtly interpreted by Eric Hoffer, who also placed much emphasis on what he termed the interchangeability of mass movements – roughly, this is much the same phenomenon, which Orwell described as transferred nationalism. Hoffer showed black on white how easily and naturally some Russian and East-Central European Jews moved from Communism to Zionism (and the other way around), or how complementary Communism and National Socialism were. [7]

If people deny their primary linguistic and cultural identity, they have to forge a new one. If they feel that they had lost or had not found yet their homeland, they will search for one somewhere else. If they abandon an earthly homeland as such, they are condemned to fabricate an ideology as a substitute for one. Suffice it to recall a most telling hint that Marx drops concerning the proletarian, who has no homeland by definition. The proletarian’s guiding principle and salvation come from the otherworldly reality, since he or she represents the home-free class with no attachment to bourgeois/this-worldly values and traditions. This sort of ontological placelessness, cultural homelessness, and historical rootlessness logically lead to an assertion that they have nothing to lose in this world. Instead, they have Communism, which is their real homeland. In fact, it might be suggested that this is much of a modern travesty of early Christianity with its idea of the populus christianus, i.e., the people in Christ, or a spiritual ensemble of human individuals who become so insofar as they meet in Christ. Yet this is exactly what happens to people within whose minds and souls a kind of dislocation of identity, attachment, and loyalty has taken place. An ideology may become a spiritual Motherland for those who have been deprived of a safe attachment to recognizable this-worldly idioms of human connection, and also of a sense of secure existence in a community of collective memory, shared sentiment, and symbolic participation.

This is not to say, however, that we must all be classified like flies, bees, or ants, or that we must all be associated with, and attached to, a once-and-for-all defined culture and
community. Modernity denies neither individual identity nor collective identity. A substantial difference between premodern and modern conditions is that identity transforms itself from a matter of ascription into one of achievement and free choice. Moreover, modernity attempts to free us from our inherited identity, which is one the central and greatest, although unfulfilled, promises of the brave new world. As Zygmunt Bauman notes:

The modern project promised to free the individual from inherited identity. Yet it did not take a stand against identity as such, against having identity, against having a solid, resilient and immutable identity. It only transformed the identity from a matter of ascription into one of achievement, thus making it an individual task and the individual’s responsibility. [8]

At the same time, the modern individual can work out multiple, open-ended, and communicating identities. We can participate in several cultures or trajectories of consciousness, conceiving of them as complementary with regard to one another, and critically questioning our own primary object of loyalty and culture. This helps to understand what has been suppressed in our culture, yet more developed in other cultures. A presupposition of human incompleteness and of the dialogue-based nature of human awareness and self-comprehension, the principle of the polylogue of identities and cultures seems the most valuable achievement of modern condition. Some scholars stressed the crucial importance of such a phenomenon as postmodern nationalism, which “would allow for and recognize the human quality of openness and the cultural characteristic of translucence...—a Milosz-like commitment to one’s own nation permeated with a responsiveness to others, a sense of multiple, communicating identities.” [9]

At this point, we have to agree with Orwell that it makes no sense to classify human beings as insects, as well as to overgeneralize the entire nations as intrinsically good or bad. Such pearls of conventional wisdom as a tendency to describe a Spaniard as natural-born aristocrat, a Briton as hypocrite, or Germans as treacherous were ascribed by Orwell to that same kind of divorce of loyalty and moral judgment – a symptom of modern consciousness, which he described as nationalism. As we have witnessed, a sinister propensity to equate much-hated modernity exclusively with the “Jews” or with “America,” which is arguably one of the most sinister and dangerous follies of the modern troubled imagination, may lead to far more tragic consequences than sheer stereotyping or the spread of exhausted clichés. It might be suggested, however, that nothing is innocent in the age of intense collective hatred, and that everything begins in political cartoons or literary forgeries and ends in the killing of innocent people.

Yet Orwell seems to have overlooked the fact that national stereotypes may have little to do with hatred. Instead, they appear as a kind of defensive mechanism against the general uncertainty of modernity, which is caused, among other things, by a shocking discovery of so many hitherto unknown modes of living and thinking, all located in societies and cultures different from ours. Stereotyping is likely to originate in our imagination as some sort of safe and comforting, albeit simplistic and naïve, categorization of the world. Under certain circumstances, it may be harmful, but in most cases it is not. Indeed, stereotyping is more of a spontaneously arising impulse to simplify and only then to grasp what looks at first sight as a threatening, insecure, unfamiliar, and diverse world of human thought and action. If so, it may nothing to do with the
aforementioned split between identity, or loyalty, and moral judgment. As Leszek Kolakowski observes:

It is a fact seldom noticed that a great deal of our mental universe – our image of the world and of other people, and our reactions to them – is made up of, or caused by, stereotypes. By stereotypes I mean those spontaneously arising quasi-empirical generalizations which, once established in our minds, are almost impossible to shift in the light of subsequent experience. This is a natural and perhaps on the whole beneficial arrangement: stereotypes – of things and people, nations and places – are indispensable to our mental security. This is why, whether they are plausible or half-true or simply false, they tend to survive disproof by experience – unless their effects are obviously harmful. If they are innocuous in their practical effects, they will persist despite the counter-examples thrown up by experience because we feel safer with them than without them: discarding them would impose on us a constant need for vigilance and consign us to a permanent state of mental uncertainty and disarray. [10]

However, the split between identity/loyalty and sound moral judgment is also a trait of the modern moral imagination. Modernity separated fact/truth and value, expertise and human intimacy, innovation and tradition, individual and society. Having said that, the aforementioned gulf between the need for an object of loyalty/belonging and the inability to question that object critically and passionately is a derivative of the chain of those painfully splitting and dichotomizing tendencies that threaten the moral integrity and reflexivity of the modern individual. The gulf between fact and value might well be observed in what Orwell describes as one’s unwillingness to see and admit sheer facts. Within the mind of the modern true believer, a fanatical belief in one set of values and ideas is sustained by a positive refusal to admit the existence of other sets of values and ideas. Moreover, a fervent belief in some abstract and distant ideal is accompanied by an equally ardent disbelief in reality. The denial of facts in favor of the hitherto unseen, unexamined, and critically unquestioned phenomenon, which was and continues to be the integral characteristic of the ideological and political fanatic’s consciousness, betrays a conflict of mutually exclusive sets of value-and-idea orientations or thought-and-action systems, rather than sheer social pathology.

The striking refusal to rely on the evidence of the senses and of reason, in the age of mass movements and dramatic social change, is, perhaps, a clue to the mystery of fanaticism. As Hoffer put it:

To rely on the evidence of the senses and of reason is heresy and treason. It is startling to realize how much unbelief is necessary to make belief possible. What we know as blind faith is sustained by innumerable unbeliefs. The fanatical Japanese in Brazil refused to believe for years the evidence of Japan’s defeat. The fanatical Communist refuses to believe an unfavorable report or evidence about Russia, nor will he be disillusioned by seeing with his own eyes the cruel misery inside the Soviet promised land. [11]

The refusal to accept empirical evidence – in a way, not dissimilar to the way in which a
selective and arbitrary historical memory of conservative and radical nationalists works – is the denial of reality and favor of imagination. Reality unable to sustain our belief or support our ideological convictions is not worth existing. Without reservations, it has to be abandoned for the sake of the new reality to come. Such an attitude requires a more or less conscious suppression of a good part of our intellectual and moral sensibilities. Otherwise, the uncertainties and tensions inside us may run too high to remain firm and committed to a holy cause. This sort of mental block and suppression of one’s moral sensitivity and common sense in favor of ideology, which by no means bypasses even intelligent people, protects them from unbearable inner contradictions and explosive conflicts with sound reason and conscience, the contradictions and conflicts that may occur at any time. For sound reason and moral sensitivity, in the age of the clash of mutually exclusive, militant, and rigid ideologies or of other symbolic designs of hatred and exclusion, are no longer at a premium. On the contrary, they become a liability. 

It throws much light on what Orwell depicts as an astonishing ability to hold two contradictory beliefs or irreconcilable attitudes at the same time. Bloodshed and violence are strongly rejected, but only if they occur on the adversary’s side. Violence ceases to be violence, once it is practiced by the “right side”; so does the mass killing of innocent people if it occurs in what is supposed to be a “progressive” country. This is not a plain stereotyping, which allows us to call our adversaries single-minded and homicidal fanatics, reserving the title of patriots and heroes for those who are on our side. This is rather a mental and ideological block of one’s human qualities that are vital for human connection and interaction, such as empathic openness, sympathetic understanding, or sheer compassion. These qualities are suppressed insofar as “they,” that is, our real or imagined ideological adversaries and political enemies, are concerned. They are fully released instantly when it comes to sympathize with human anguish and pain experienced by “us,” that is, on the side of the righteous.

Interestingly enough, Orwell suggests that even the pacifist movements are tinged with a tendency to transfer loyalty and to improvise an identity, both expected to disguise the real attitude of some pacifists to social reality. However astonishing it may sound, that real attitude of some pacifists is nothing but a secret worship of brutal force and successful violence. This allows them to condemn instantly any war casualties inflicted by Britain or America on other countries without mentioning any single crime against humanity committed by China or Russia. A small minority of the adherents of this loosely bound ideology consists of intellectual pacifists solely motivated by hatred of Western democracy and secret admiration for totalitarianism. This is to say that a part of pacifism appears as nothing other than a profound contempt for, and intense hatred of, Western liberal democracy disguised as a humane concern for peace and human life. At the bottom of their hearts, intellectual pacifists of this cut despise Western legalist consciousness, democracy, political institutions, and prose of life as, supposedly, unable to inspire imagination and lacking in something thrilling, romantic, and adventurous. Hence, an idea that political force, if exercised by a liberal democracy, cannot in principle be efficient. Whatever happens in a liberal democracy in terms of its political victories or the demonstration of military might, is for the better of the establishment or the bourgeoisie or capitalism. At the same time, violence practiced by a rival ideology or civilization, such as Communism, is efficient, for its purpose is to work out a viable alternative to the much-hated Western democracy.
Interestingly, Orwell was not alone in his skepticism about pacifism and other vague social movements in the era of fiercely ideological and violent politics. Showing the origins and the rise of National Socialism, Raymond Aron assessed what he qualified as “the elements of the German fifth column” in the following way:

The fifth column is a typical element of the age of empires. It is recruited mainly among three sorts of men: pacifists, revolted by the material and moral cost of total war who, at the bottom of their hearts, prefer the triumph of an empire to the independent sovereignty of bellicose states; defeatists, who despair of their own country; and ideologues, who set their political faith above their patriotism and submit to the Caesar whose regime and ideology they admire. [12]

It should never be forgotten, however, that such global, all-embracing and exclusive ideologies as National Socialism and Communism functioned as secular religions. Moreover, secular ideocracies were able to manifest themselves as both an Army and a Church. This means that they were able to recruit their adherents from almost every walk of life and from every sector of society- from disenchanted intellectuals, who still felt a strong need for the certainty-emanating value-and-idea systems, to commoners infatuated with modern apocalyptic theories promising the beginning of a new history. [13] At the same time, it makes no sense to overgeneralize the modern peace movements portraying them all as motivated either by hatred of the West accompanied by secret admiration for ideological and political adversaries of Western democracies or by latent adoration of brutal political force and violence. What Orwell achieved with the stroke of genius was, instead, his emphasis placed on spontaneously improvised attachments, transferred loyalties, and fabricated identities, all conceived of as a part of the hidden logic of hatred. What results from this kind of the hidden logic and metaphysics of hatred is that hatred tends to masquerade as love and compassion – love of peace and humanity, or compassion for the weak, underprivileged, oppressed, and dispossessed.

One more lesson of great importance that we can learn from Orwell’s “Notes on Nationalism” is that disenchanted, isolated, and alienated intellectuals tend to succumb to those transferable and dislocated identities much easier and much more frequently than common people. In the age of mass movements, independent, skeptical, and critical thought is no longer at a premium; instead, it becomes a liability. Since intellectuals, by virtue of being at odds with mundane forms of earthly attachment, are able to translate their needs for roots and home into ideological and political fidelity to imagined communities of virtue, they eventually lose their ability to be at peace with common sense. Common sense is a valuable quality of common people, who, precisely because of their natural skepticism to things disconnected from mundane reality, are much more immune to fanaticism and hatred. Hence, Orwell’s merciless irony in his caustic remark about those British intellectuals, who confidently stated that the American troops had been brought to Europe not to fight the Germans but to crush an English revolution, and who sincerely believed this to have been the case. Only those who belong to the intelligentsia are able to believe things like that, concludes Orwell. In his view, no ordinary man could be such a fool (p.178). Orwell’s mistrust for intellectuals, as we shall see, reaches its climax in his portrayal, in 1984, of the character O’Brien, a sinister
mental technician dwelling far beyond good and evil, Oceania’s top specialist in brainwashing and indoctrination, and a modern equivalent of the Grand Inquisitor.

This sort of loosely bound and flexible morality comes into being along with the aforementioned ideological blocks of sensitivity. Since our ideological commitment may be jeopardized by the fact that other flesh-and-blood human beings suffer bloodshed, torture, or other calamities, the only attitude at hand that can prevent us from inflicting pain or suffering on our fellow human beings is the denial of the facts of their suffering. Such a refusal to believe in politically inconvenient or otherwise harmful facts can be successfully combined with a propensity to deprive our enemies of their human traits. This mechanism of self-defense, or rather self-inflicted moral blindness, betrays the compensatory and defensive nature of hatred: hatred appears as the outcome of our self-contempt and suppressed sense of guilt. The same might be said about rage, which is an inevitable consequence of the suppressed sense of shame. [14] In the light of this, it becomes more or less comprehensible why even highly qualified scholars and sophisticated intellectuals can deny the Holocaust. It also sheds much light on why anti-Semitism can be so intense and strong in Central and East European countries where there are no Jews left yet where the Holocaust occurred in conjunction with a strong support of local governments or even an active participation of local population. [15]

Orwell tells a most telling wartime story about how the liberal News Chronicle published, as an example of shocking barbarity, photographs of Russians hanged by the Germans. A couple of years later, they published, with warm approval, almost the same photographs with the only difference that this time it was Germans hanged by the Russians. Another example was the Star, which published with approval photographs of nearly naked female collaborationists being bated by the Paris mob. Orwell was deeply disturbed by the astonishing similarity of these photographs to the Nazi photographs of Jews being baited by the Berlin mob. This is to say that what had been initially perceived as an example of shocking barbarity, miraculously turned into a virtuous thing only because it had been done in the right cause.

History as a continuous record of heroic deeds is manufactured in much the same manner. Modern intellectuals celebrate the Inquisition, Sir Francis Drake skinning Spanish prisoners alive, the Reign of Terror, the heroes of the Mutiny blowing Indians from the guns, or Cromwell’s soldiers slashing Irish women’s faces with razors, without giving much consideration to atrocities in Russia, China, Spain, Mexico, or Hungary (pp.165-166). A selective perception of history and politics is related not only to a widespread tendency to employ a double standard when dealing with “our” and “their” roles in history, but also to an astonishing ability to decide whether some historical events happened, resting such a decision solely on political predilection. History, thus, turns into a kind of irresponsible play of imagination of a partisan social actor, who sees in history what he or she wants to see and who builds, in his or her imagination, the monuments to his or her imagined communities of truth and virtue.

However, the question remains, what is the origin of fanaticism? Orwell, as well as several other perceptive writers, pointed to the general uncertainty and failure to understand what is really happening in the world as an inciting invitation, extended to the most confused, scared, or frustrated modern individuals, to cling to lunatic beliefs. The fact generally acknowledged by all major social philosophers and sociologists of
today is that modernity destroyed the old certainties without providing any new workable, normative, prescriptive, and imperative designs of selfhood. To create such a design of selfhood for oneself, without any assistance from an observable and unshakably reliable source, such as solid cultural tradition or enduring and change-immune faith, seems unbearably difficult, if not impossible, for those who are not at home in a world of modern self-making and self-discovery. Hence, a desperate need for beliefs, theories, or practices that promise to fight uncertainty and also to revive the neglected symbols and forgotten values. Hatred comes to such a disturbed soul as a promise of the restoration of certainty. The modern world, too complex and threatening to figure out what kind of values have to be taken seriously and what kind of ideas have to be credited, all of a sudden becomes transparent and clear. The image of an enemy restores our faith in ourselves as capable of supporting the right cause, the holy cause, the righteous and virtuous as against the vicious, spoiled, and incomprehensible. An enemy is what we can place beyond our reach and understanding. In so doing, we identify what is beyond our reach and understanding with what is uncertain inside us. At this point, hatred always comes from our self-contempt and self-hatred. Our enemies are nothing other than what we hate in ourselves the most, and what we externalize, projecting it onto the most familiar, though the least comprehensible, idiom of otherness. As Hoffer notes:

Are the frustrated more easily indoctrinated than the non-frustrated? Are they more credulous? Pascal was of the opinion that “one was well-minded to understand holy writ when one hated oneself.” There is apparently some connection between dissatisfaction with oneself and a proneness to credulity. The urge to escape our real self is also an urge to escape the rational and the obvious. The refusal to see ourselves as we are develops a distaste for facts and cold logic. [16]

Our willingness to sink our identity in some mysterious bodies of ideas or of “the spirit of the people” may be related to a considerable extent to our dissatisfactions, disappointments, personal failures, or overall alienation from modern society and culture. However, the question remains, why people can so easily transpose or reverse their attitudes and beliefs? For instance, how is it possible that an ardent patriot of Great Britain suddenly slips into Anglophobia (or the other way around)? Why and how can a seemingly sober-minded and skeptical intellectual turn into an enthusiastic adherent of other countries, cultures, religions, and political institutions? According to Orwell, British writers who might best exemplify the ability to transform oneself from an Anglophobe into someone violently pro-British were F. A. Voigt, Malcolm Muggeridge, Evelyn Waugh, Hugh Kingsmill, and, to some extent, T. S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis (p.169). The intellectual who turned out to have been able to suppress his democratic sensibilities in favor of an opposing worldview was G. K. Chesterton described by Orwell as a writer of considerable talent who chose to suppress his sensibilities and intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda. This led him so far as to glorify every walk of life in largely idealized, if not imagined, France, or to admire Mussolini’s Italy—a variety of transferred loyalty, which Orwell describes as political Catholicism. A true hater of jingoism and imperialism, and a true friend of democracy in home politics, Chesterton failed to find a word against imperialism and the conquest of colored races practiced by Italians or Frenchmen. Nor did he ever mention the fact that Mussolini had simply destroyed freedom and democracy in Italy (pp.160-161).
Chesterton’s case is particularly instructive when thinking of transferred loyalties and fabricated identities as one of the basic characteristics of the modern troubled imagination. The modern/troubled moral imagination appears to be unable to reconcile the conflicting sets of values and ideas, and also incapable of a truly workable universalistic pattern of worldview. It appears to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to be a political liberal and a religious conservative at the same time. How to reconcile one’s being a dedicated patriot of Britain and being a devout Roman Catholic? Or how about being an East-Central European nationalist and also a skeptical liberal cosmopolitan? How to combine fidelity and doubt, value and truth, imagination and reality? Organized religion is unable to show the way out, since religion itself increasingly becomes politically exploited or otherwise abused by modern barbarians. At best, it becomes politically neutral, if not to say marginal, in the modern world.

We have to admit that ethical universalism, or secular humanism, is far from a universally appealing answer, too. First and foremost, ethical universalism, so potent a form of social and cultural criticism, is placed in jeopardy or simply put aside in the time of trouble or in the era of ideological clashes. Within the framework of the modern moral/troubled imagination, nothing is durable and nothing is lasting. Ethical universalism may come, to a weak and disturbed modern individual, as much too big a challenge and also as too great a disappointment, for it offers neither prescriptive designs of thought and action nor the way out of a world of unbearable tensions, ambiguities, and uncertainties. Instead, it takes every human individual as, ultimately, the only agent of reason and conscience capable of moral choice. Sadly, this apparently appears as too weak a basis for decisive action and also for a workable identity, no matter whether ethnic, political, or cultural (as we have seen, they may be interchangeable).

Apparently, a society or culture in crisis inevitably reveals itself through individual consciousness in crisis. One such manifestation of culture in crisis is what was termed by Vytautas Kavolis the ambiguous person. Kavolis notes that a number of human beings quite frequently reveal, for themselves, their psychic ambiguity, although they become absolutely clear and unambiguous in forming or at least influencing behavior and stances of other human beings. In Kavolis’s opinion, the ambiguous person especially longs for the intense experiences: this kind of the striving for intensity, which is psychoanalytically identifiable and exploitable, jeopardizes not only the personality of the ambiguous man/woman but the entire modern consciousness and culture as well. According to Kavolis:

Where the striving for intensity prevails, the authoritarian style in both thinking and decision-making predominates quite often, even when the conscious contents of the thought are libertarian: let’s take, for example, Marcuse or the Living Theater. The intensity seekers quite naturally tend to think in polarities contrasting “truth” to “error,” or “virtue” to “meanness,” instead of searching for some missing links and nuances. Those nuances represent nothing other but the psychic ambiguity in their character, which they consider unbearable and try to repress with arbitrary, though “real,” moments of intensity. This is why they, even in demanding the freedom of choice, expect others to choose their way to be free or even their way to conceive of freedom. The dogmatic demands to the world spring from the inner ambiguity of personality. One can be preserved by the vigorous terms from one’s inner decomposition. (Psychoanalysts identified this
mechanism in the earlier, more or less romantic, Russian revolutionaries.) Dogmatism is the mechanical stabilization of the ambiguous man, rather than the organic one springing from the depth of his personality. (Yet this kind of protective armor, deep inside the ambiguous man, sooner or later comes to crack down and destroy either the ambiguous man himself or others.) [17]

One of the possible implications of Kavolis’s thought would be that the ambiguous person, being incapable of analytically grasping and critically questioning him/herself, eventually comes to misrepresent social reality itself, projecting on it those painful elements of his/her personality and experience that are too hard for him/her to understand or to eliminate from him/herself. (It would be some kind of dogmatism, which springs from the cognitive dissonance.) Therefore, if “the dogmatic demands to the world spring from the inner ambiguity of personality,” dogmatism itself is an illusion of the clear standpoint and transparent thought.

One’s striving for intensity, in one’s milieu, betrays one’s inability to critically analyze oneself or human reality as it is—before its enchantment with some kind of ideological magic, ideocratic formulas, carnal and psychic experiments, and the like. The dogmatic/ambiguous person is incapable of critically analyzing at all; he/she is only capable of creating gloomy prophecies or of symbolically excommunicating those who are considered to be a threat to the body social and its nearly mystical coherence. When the quest for enemies comes to replace the critical analysis, his/her troubled imagination easily provides a group-target. Hence, a strong need for the conspiracy theory. Combined with a kind of self-inflicted moral blindness, block of moral sensitivity, refusal to accept reality, and distaste for cold logic and facts, the conspiratorial view of the world provides the necessary type of reasoning and amoral logic in finding an indispensable group target. If we refuse to believe in the infallibility of the Party or the Leader, or in the holiness of our cause, we will always link any sort of infamous things or violent politics practiced on our side to an imagined group target. Such a group target, as we have seen, is just a negative double of the imagined community of virtue and truth we identify with. The imagined community we love can be sustained in our imagination only by projecting its awful political practices and disgraceful manipulations onto the imagined community we hate. This is why the conspiracy theory will always survive any political regime, moral culture, or type of government. Whatever its guise and whatever its origin in a given society, the conspiracy theory is a ready-made answer to all politically or morally inconvenient questions. Indeed, the fanatic without the conspiracy theory at hand sounds as an oxymoron; and so does the dogmatic/ambiguous person without one.

Orwell’s notes on the anatomy of collective hatred make several points of crucial importance. First and foremost, the designs of ideological faith, resentment, and hatred are interchangeable. Political and ideological loyalties are transferable. Identities are movable, changeable, and renewable. All of these things become possible not only because of the manipulative modern politics, cynical brainwashing, or propaganda. It is exactly the other way around that we could formulate this: manipulations, brainwashing, and propaganda can become truly efficient only in the epoch of transferred loyalties and fabricated identities. They would never have worked, say, in Medieval or Renaissance Europe. The phenomena of transferred loyalties, fabricated identities, and interchangeability of mass movements perfectly match the criteria of what Ernest Gellner
described as human modularity. In his view a modular person, capable of adjusting him/herself to any kind of social arrangement or political setting, and also able to enter or terminate any association without being open to the charge of treason, is a highly ambivalent creation of modernity. He/she is so, since human modularity is equally indispensable for both civil society and nationalism-everything depends here on which direction it takes and what kind of politics it enters. As an expression of modern human flexibility and freedom of change or adjustment, it may well serve as a necessary condition of civil liberties. Yet it also may be instrumental in shaping nationalist movements with great risks involved. Fabrication of human loyalty, object of attachment, identity, and personality – the corner stone of a mass anonymous society – turns out to be one of the most ambivalent and unpredictable forces of modernity. [18]

Second, Orwell’s thoughts throw new light on why and how, for instance, western Marxists and ideological/political Russophiles may well be regarded if not as brothers in faith, then at least as brothers in the dramatic loss of their initial identities and objects of loyalty. The loss of an initial object of individual love, loyalty, attachment, and memory anticipates the coming of the forged objects of collective love and hatred. If we begin to forge an interpretive framework for mobile and easily adjustable truth, and also to foster a design of selfhood, which allows room for nothing but transferable loyalties and interchangeable or otherwise fabricated identities, we shall sooner or later end up in an ideocracy. We will inevitably lose our traditions, favorite little things, friends, families, and, finally, language and memory. We will lose what makes us human beings-identity, freedom, and sensitivity. Having sacrificed faith, history, and culture to the glory of the phantoms of the troubled imagination, we will inexorably end up in an awful travesty of Truth, Liberty, Equality, and Justice.

Such was Orwell’s warning to humanity after World War II. And we would simply deceive ourselves by stating that this warning is out of date in our days.

Footnotes


2. For more on the morphology of nationalism and also on the modernizing and critical potential of liberal nationalism, see Leonidas Donskis, Identity and Freedom: Mapping Nationalism and Social Criticism in Twentieth-Century Lithuania (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

3. Aleksandras Shtromas offers a challenging interpretation of nationalism vis-à-vis patriotism. His illuminating remarks on the differences between the two are a good example of how a thoughtful study of nationalism and patriotism can invite reconsideration of these phenomena. See Aleksandras Shtromas, "Ideological Politics and the Contemporary World: Have We Seen the Last of 'Isms'?, in Aleksandras Shtromas, ed., The End of "Isms"? Reflections on the Fate of Ideological Politics after Communism's Collapse (Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), pp.183-225.
4. For more this issue, see Donskis, Identity and Freedom, op. cit.


7. See Eric Hoffer, The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements (New York: Time, 1963). For obvious reasons, I do not subscribe to many points Hoffer makes in his seminal and provocative essay on hatred and fanaticism written in 1951. Yet a gross oversimplification of the whole matter and some evident historical distortions concerning mass movements and their role in history notwithstanding, The True Believer remains a work of exceptional clarity and lucidity. From the standpoint of the incisiveness of his insights into the nature of self-contempt, uncertainty, ambivalence, fanaticism, and hatred, Hoffer's essay has yet to be surpassed in the fields of moral, social, and political philosophy.


15. For more on the theory of two genocides and on the theory of symmetry in Lithuanian and Jewish sufferings, both disguised forms of modern Lithuanian anti-Semitism, see

16. Hoffer, *The True Believer*, op. cit., p.86. It is important that Hoffer defines clearly the term "frustrated," which is not used in his book as a clinical term. In ibid., p.179, he writes that "it denotes here people who, for one reason or another, feel that their lives are spoiled or wasted."


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