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George Orwell and the Radical Scientific Left in Britain, 1945–1950

THE SOCIALIST NOVELIST GEORGE ORWELL (1903–1950) and the radical scientific Left were equally committed to a future British socialist state, yet in the early postwar era Orwell became one of their leading critics. One explanation for this apparent contradiction, favoured by Gary Werskey and other historians, is that Orwell, a fervent anti-communist, could not reject communism “without explicitly rejecting the (communist) Left’s package of support for science, materialism and Soviet socialism” [Werskey (1978)]. By this reasoning, Orwell’s political opposition to the scientific Left was a consequence of his anti-communism.

In this paper I will argue the converse, namely that Orwell’s rejection of communism was predicated on his conception of the use of science and materialism in the Soviet Union. Orwell believed that Soviet-style ideologically-driven scientific research, and the political power of Russian scientists such as Trofim Lysenko, were dystopian exemplars of how a future Western totalitarian regime might originate and operate. A key feature of this argument, based on Orwell’s correspondence and essays, together with evidence of his direct involvement in the Lysenko controversies of 1946–49, is that Orwell was convinced that scientists are singularly prone to totalitarian habits of thought. The pro-Soviet attitudes and activities of British scientific intellectuals such as J.D. Bernal and J.B.S. Haldane were, for Orwell, symptomatic of this tendency and constituted a threat to Britain’s future socialist democracy. Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) was Orwell’s final and influential prophetic warning of this threat.

References

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