THE BETRAYAL OF DISSENT

BEYOND ORWELL, HITCHENS AND THE NEW AMERICAN CENTURY

Scott Lucas

‘Completely fearless, challenging not only the bombast of Christopher Hitchens and other pro-war supporters but also our preconceptions about that icon of that Left, George Orwell.’

PETER WILBY
Editor, New Statesman
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To my constant dissenters, Ryan and Lauryn
Acknowledgements

This book was meant to be no more than a short polemic, spurred by the interaction of George Orwell with the ‘Left’ and Big Brother and by the castigation of those who questioned the rush to a War on Terror after 11 September 2001. For me, it has turned out to be much more.

I am grateful to Anne Beech, who rescued and guided this project at a late stage, and to the staff of Pluto. I am indebted to Frances Stonor Saunders, who encouraged me to test initial ideas in the New Statesman and who set an example with her own work. Over the past 18 months, many friends and colleagues, willingly or unwillingly, shared my anxieties and hopes. I thank in particular Liam Kennedy, for his unfailing calm input and reassurance; David Ryan, for the enthusiasm he sparked with his approach to US foreign policy; and Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Saied Reza Ameli, for a valuable perspective outside ‘America’. Maria Ryan is officially the Research Assistant for this book; unofficially, she has been essential in developing and refining its arguments.

To Helen Laville, I offer this book as thanks for the past and hope for the future.
The loud little handful – as usual – will shout for the war. The pulpit will – warily and cautiously – object ... at first. The great, big, dull bulk of the nation will rub its sleepy eyes and try to make out why there should be a war, and will say, earnestly and indignantly, ‘It is unjust and dishonorable, and there is no necessity for it.’ Then the handful will shout louder. A few fair men on the other side will argue and reason against the war with speech and pen, and at first will have a hearing and be applauded, but it will not last long; those others will outshout them, and presently the antiwar audiences will thin out and lose popularity. Before long, you will see this curious thing: the speakers stoned from the platform, and free speech strangled by hordes of furious men... . Next the statesmen will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked, and every man will be glad of those conscience-soothing falsities, and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself that the war is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception.
Introduction

The intellectual’s role generally is to uncover and elucidate the contest, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power, wherever and whenever possible.

Edward Said

This is a story of two lists compiled and disseminated by ‘decent’ men.

The first list is in a modest, somewhat battered, ‘quarto notebook with a pale-bluish cardboard cover’. Inside, on 65 pages in red and blue ballpoint and pencil, there are approximately 135 names. Many have annotations beside them. Stephen Spender, whom George Orwell had labelled a ‘pansy poet’ in the 1930s before the two began corresponding, was again a ‘Sentimental sympathiser, & very unreliable. Easily influenced. Tendency towards homosexuality’. Charlie Chaplin, admired by Orwell in 1941 for ‘his power to stand for a sort of concentrated essence of the common man, for the ineradicable belief in decency that exists in the hearts of ordinary people’, was now identified with the cryptic ‘??’.

J.B. Priestley was not only a ‘Strong sympathiser, [with] possibly ... some kind of organisational tie-up’ and ‘Very anti-USA’, he had also made ‘huge sums of money in USSR’. Cecil Day-Lewis, the Poet Laureate, was evaluated as ‘Previously C.P. [Communist Party]. Probably not now completely reliable.’ There was apparently some hope for Isaac Deutscher, the historian who would later write an incisive critique of Nineteen Eighty-Four, as he ‘Could change??’

These names, and others such as Paul Robeson, Richard Crossman, Harold Laski and Henry Wallace, could be found in the twentieth and final volume of Peter Davison’s comprehensive catalogue of Orwell’s life and works. There were 38 suspects, however, who were still beyond us until June 2003.

Davison, the Orwell Archive, which kept the blue notebook
safe from readers’ eyes, and the British Government would not reveal them. For these unknown individuals were those whom George Orwell, defender of free thought and clear prose, foe of Big Brother, offered up to British Intelligence.

On 29 March 1949, Orwell, gaunt and tubercular, was lying in a Gloucestershire sanatorium. Three months earlier, he had completed a frantic retyping of the final draft of Nineteen Eighty-Four, but the effort had exhausted him. In April, he would pursue his last hope for recovery, the experimental antibiotic streptomycin. By the start of the following year, he would be dead.

This late winter day, however, the author was in good spirits, for he was receiving a special guest. Celia Kirwan was well connected to the literary world: the sister-in-law of Arthur Koestler, she had worked as an editorial assistant on the journals Horizon and Polemic, both outlets for Orwell’s essays. In 1946, soon after the death of his wife, Orwell had become infatuated with Kirwan and quickly proposed marriage. She ‘gently refused him’, but they remained close friends.

By 1949 Kirwan had a professional as well as personal interest in seeing Orwell, as she was working for the top-secret Information Research Department (IRD). Created in January 1948 by a Labour Government trying to manoeuvre between Stalin’s Soviet Union and the capitalism of the United States, the IRD was working with the Foreign Office and MI6 to generate and distribute pro-British and anti-Communist propaganda at home and overseas. The IRD’s standard operating procedure was to pass useful ‘information’ to journalists, authors, trade unions and voluntary associations, who would then disseminate the material under their own names.

During her visit, Kirwan just happened to ‘discuss some aspects of [IRD’s] work’ with Orwell. She reported, ‘He was delighted to learn of them, and expressed his wholehearted and enthusiastic approval of our aims.’ Unable to write for IRD because of his health, the author eagerly suggested the names of others who could be helpful. As she departed, Kirwan ‘left some material with [Orwell]’ and promised to send ‘photostats of some of his articles on the theme of Soviet
repression of the arts, in the hope that he may become inspired when he is better to take them up again’.6

It is unclear whether Orwell mentioned the blue notebook to Kirwan. If he had, it would not have been much of a revelation to her, as the roll-call of the suspects was probably annotated by Arthur Koestler. In any event, within a week Orwell was asking Richard Rees, the millionaire who had published the author’s first essays, to retrieve the list from the bedroom of his London flat. With the names before him, he pondered his selection carefully, writing to Rees, ‘The whole difficulty is to decide where each person stands, & one has to treat each case individually.’ A day later, he sent Kirwan the 38 who merited the IRD’s further attention.7

Beyond the celebrity of Charlie Chaplin, J.B. Priestley or Michael Redgrave being proffered to British Intelligence, the suspects are bland fare. There were two Soviet agents, the jailed physicist Alan Nunn May and Peter Smollett of the wartime Ministry of Information, who had intervened to stop Jonathan Cape publishing Animal Farm as an anti-Soviet fable. There was Tom Driberg, the flamboyant Labour MP who was in contact with MI5 as well as officials from the Soviet Embassy. Then, however, it was a case of the Daily Express’s correspondent, Alaric Jacob, who dared to think during the Second World War that the Soviet society was ‘basically a just one’, of Guardian reporters and editors who did not sufficiently criticise Moscow, of a prominent historian like E.H. Carr whose interpretation was the ‘wrong’ one, of a novelist like Naomi Mitchison who apparently was a ‘silly sympathiser’, or of a Nobel Prize-winning physicist like Patrick Blackett whose transgression is still unclear.8

No, the significance of ‘The List’ is not what it says about the 38, but what it offers us about Orwell.

The second list was compiled more than 50 years later in another time of crisis. Unlike Orwell’s, this rogues’ gallery was offered not to the British Intelligence Services or even to a love interest, but to all of us. It has emerged over a period of months. Indeed, additions are still being made today.

From 19 September 2001, eight days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Christopher Hitchens profiled the mad, bad and dangerous for his readers. There
were Noam Chomsky and his nefarious allies, Howard Zinn and Norman Finkelstein. John Pilger was coupled with Harold Pinter. Tariq Ali was ‘ridiculous’ and Robert Fisk ‘a reactionary simpleton’. Sam Husseini, the director of Washington’s Institute for Public Accuracy, was beyond acceptability, as were all Hitchens’ former colleagues at *The Nation*. Even Nelson Mandela was ‘stupid’ and ‘crass’, speaking ‘garbage’.9

This time, the naming of names was above board. There was no need to debate the merits or ethics of cooperating secretly with the Intelligence Services. Hitchens’ ‘freedom’ and ‘clarity of thought’ openly acknowledged that the need was not to engage with dissent, but to close it off. The contrarian, running with the mainstream, allowed no other contrarians.

A half-century, including the end of one long Cold War and the start of a new one, separates them, but Orwell and Hitchens are now joined. Both purportedly are iconic representatives of the ‘Left’ who distinguished themselves by attacking faulty comrades who strayed, cynically or naively, towards the enemy. Both are purveyors of a distinct and exalted Englishness, elevated above the defects of the Europeans and guaranteed to refine the crude sensibilities of Americans. Both are the exponents and supposed embodiment of a clarity of language which will transport the clarity of a decent moral, political and social vision.

Such tributes are self-perpetuating, for from his first sketches, Orwell was conscious that he was establishing a reputation. He would manufacture an unsuccessful battle with the ‘literary cliques’ who supposedly kept his novels in check and then convert it into the successful, selfless defence of virtue against alleged political cliques. With his ‘good prose … like a windowpane’, he would ‘make political writing into an art’ from the ‘starting point [of] … a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice’.11 He would be the ‘man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is generously angry – a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls’.

And, as Orwell constructed himself for the reader through his study of the ‘nineteenth-century liberal’ Charles Dickens,
so Hitchens, in the guise of a biography of Orwell as well as his political essays and extended ‘letter’ to an acolyte, has rendered himself the decent contrarian. He is the virtuous intellectual, guarding moral and political purities even if (and indeed because) this sets him apart from supposed comrades.

There is nothing inherently wrong in this process, either about the authors or the positions they are establishing. Rare is the writer who, interpreting the world for his audience, does not use sleight-of-pen to promote himself. What is unsettling is that Orwell and Hitchens are also joined in an effort to diminish, ridicule or even shut out completely the views of others. The literary and political battlefield they set out is never a level one; they occupy the higher ground because of the alleged shortcomings of foes and colleagues. They stand on the shoulders of straw men.

Thus the ‘early’ Orwell crafts the extraordinary Part II of The Road to Wigan Pier as an extended polemic against any and all who would claim the mantle of Socialism, the Orwell of the Second World War carps at pacifists as accomplices of Fascism, and the ‘late’ Orwell spends his final years assailing the Left as apologists and even adjuncts of Soviet Communism. Hitchens picks out Chomsky for totemic distortion and ridicule and, ignoring others who raise equally troublesome questions and objections, draws his caricature of a deviant Left which deserves obsolescence.

In his Letters to a Young Contrarian, Hitchens resurrected an Orwell column from November 1945 to exalt his subject and himself as society’s honourable dissenters, highlighting truths no matter how unpleasant they might be:

Whenever A and B are in opposition to one another, anyone who attacks or criticises A is accused of aiding and abetting B. And it is often, objectively and on a short-term analysis, that he is making things easier for B. Therefore say the supporters of A, shut up and don’t criticise: or at least criticise ‘constructively’, which in practice always means favourably. And from this it is only a short step to arguing the suppression and distortion of known facts is the highest duty of a journalist.12
Hitchens’ intent is clear: because he and George dared criticise the ‘Left’, they are accused by that same ‘Left’ of abetting Conservative Governments, imperialist exploiters, capitalist schemers, sinister US foreign policies. They will prevail, however, their freedom of thought and expression vanquishing any who would oppose them.

Yet, what if the As and Bs of Orwell’s world were filled in as ‘anyone who attacks or criticises anti-Communist policy is accused of aiding and abetting the Soviet Union … Therefore say the supporters of anti-Communist policy, shut up and don’t criticise’? Or ‘anyone who attacks or criticises the War on Terror is accused of aiding and abetting Al-Qa’eda’? Or ‘anyone who attacks or criticises the occupation of Iraq is accused of aiding and abetting Saddam Hussein’? Suddenly the ‘anyones’ whom Orwell always fought and often accused from the 1930s to his death, the ‘anyones’ whom Hitchens today labels as appeasers of Serbo-Fascism/Islamo-Fascism/Iraqi Fascism do not appear so villainous, and the decency of the supposed contrarian is no longer so absolute.

This book is a polemic, but it does not seek to invert the process of naming, to cast Orwell and Hitchens as ‘wrong’, while those comrades who have been besmirched and belittled by them, and the many more who are ignored because they are setting out challenges which cannot be easily dismissed, suddenly emerge as ‘right’.

No, this is simply a request to call the spade of ‘contrarian’ political writing a shovel; a shovel that is not brought down on the heads of those with power, but on the heads of those exposing and confronting that power, a shovel that is not wielded against the state but for it. Orwell and Hitchens, for all the proclamations of their individualism, never operated as maverick intellectuals when they defined the limits of acceptable opinion. Instead, they manoeuvred within a wider social and political environment in which, far from challenging the agencies of the Government, they could be complicit with them, identifying and tagging that dissent which could not be permitted.

The significance of Orwell’s notebook, absolved by Hitchens as a ‘party game’, did not lie in the identification and black-
listing of Communists. Orwell's designated enemies were those on the ‘Left’, irrespective of Communist affiliation, who had caused offence by pursuing differing Socialisms, differing theories (or even the very notion of economic or social ‘theory’), differing perspectives on British foreign policy. In the Manichaean world of the Cold War, Orwell finally left no ground between support of the freedom-loving West and the tyrants of Moscow. For those who tried to occupy such ground, the outcome was a naming and shaming not only in Orwell’s essays, but also in the selection and handover to those whom Orwell could have parodied elsewhere as ‘Big Brother’. It was an outcome in harmony with the ideology and strategy of a US Government which declared, long before Joseph McCarthy, that Communist subversives lurked everywhere, ‘each carrying with [them] the germs of death for society’.13

Christopher Hitchens’ public roll-call of offenders is unlikely to expose any concealed Islamic fascists or servants of Saddam. That, however, was never the objective. Just as Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, had warned, ‘Watch what you say, watch what you do’,14 Hitchens would silence those who asked for a consideration of US foreign policy as well as of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ in the setting for 9–11, those who posted any alternative to a US-led military campaign in Afghanistan, those who examined the probable cause, plan of action and possible consequences of US unilateralism in the toppling of Saddam Hussein and occupation of Iraq. And all this, of course, was just fine for a Bush Administration which had made clear, ‘Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.’15

This is not a conspiracy, a deception by which ‘free’ intellectuals carry out the will of political masters. Indeed, the promotion of the individual thinker proceeding objectively, against tyrannical foes from Stalin to bin Laden to Saddam, is even more effective in silencing those who are supposedly too naive or too deceitful to oppose these menaces. It is this silencing that is vital to a ‘manufacture of consent’ for the wars which are supposedly being fought in our name and for our good. And it is this silencing that must always be challenged. As George Monbiot, who has always escaped Hitchens’ notice, wrote in October 2001: ‘Democracy is